



VACCA

VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD
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Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency:

Return To Country Program Evaluation Report

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14 June 2022

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Lirata Consulting acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters across Australia on which the Return to Country visits and this evaluation took place. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and to their emerging leaders. Always was, always will be First Nations land.

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We also specifically thank the VACCA Research and Evidence Development (RED) Team for their expert assistance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2015, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) has been operating its Return to Country (RTC) program for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. The program supports young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to travel to their home Country to meet Elders, visit cultural sites and to learn about history through songs, stories, art and the natural environment.

The RTC program is a celebration of Aboriginal cultural practice. It recognises the impact of disconnection of identity, health and wellbeing and is about knowing who you are, where you come from and what this means. The program incorporates people, land, water, language, kinship systems, lore, knowledge, beliefs and spirituality. It is about shared history and shared memories, healing and resilience, survival and pride.

This report presents the findings of a small-scale evaluation of RTC trips funded by the Gandel Foundation. The evaluation focused on the process of planning, delivering, and following up on RTC trips, and highlighted outcomes as a result of the trips for participants, family on Country and staff members. It also focused on any potential improvements to the way the RTC program can capture learnings and outcomes in the future.

Since 2019 the RTC program has been through a period of significant delays and cancellations due to the broader COVID context and lockdowns. Despite this, the nine trips that were completed during the funding period provide a number of key lessons and outcomes which can support the thinking of VACCA, Gandel Foundation and the wider RTC program. These are set out below.

Flexible funding supported the successful planning, delivery and follow up of RTCs for children and young people

RTC trips have been delivered with a diverse range of participants, from different cultural backgrounds and to different parts of the state and country. Participants were identified through a robust process of internal referrals from other VACCA programs, and linked to existing VACCA tools such as the child or young person's cultural plan.

Planning these trips was complex, and required a great deal of logistical and cultural management throughout the process. **VACCA staff, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, successfully planned and delivered RTC trips through extensive logistical and cultural pre-planning, and a trauma-informed approach to working with children and families.** Logistically, the process included robust planning to ensure safety and risk management. Culturally, this sometimes included scoping trips to build an understanding of the process and context of each return to Country, as well as building and sustaining strong links to family on Country. On an individual and Community level, complex inter-generational trauma also needs to be considered and managed during the planning and delivery of RTC trips.

Despite the complexity and challenges, **highly skilled and competent VACCA staff were able to deliver a number of high quality outcomes through strong planning and delivery skills.** Wherever extensive scoping was undertaken, especially if it was done in a culturally appropriate manner, and led by an Aboriginal person, the RTC was likely to be successful. **VACCA and the RTC staff have leveraged their extensive cultural knowledge and accompanying skills to successfully deliver the program.** It is important that VACCA continues to ensure that the staff involved in each RTC have the right combination of skills, knowledge and relationships to successfully manage the process. It is also important that sufficient significant scoping time for each trip is built into the program.

The evaluation also highlighted the importance of seeing RTC as an ongoing process, with multiple channels of engagement between the participant and their family on Country. There are **opportunities for developing processes which ensure prompt follow up from an RTC trip, which can ensure that outcomes are sustained and can lead to other outcomes for the participant.**

Throughout, **the flexible funding from Gandel Foundation was a key element in ensuring that RTCs could be properly planned and successfully delivered.** The flexible funding enabled staff delivering the program to be responsive to emerging issues during the planning, delivery and follow up of RTCs, without needing to sacrifice program quality.

The program enabled positive outcomes for children and young people, families on Country, and VACCA staff

There have been substantial positive outcomes during the RTCs for children and young people, families on Country and staff who participated in these trips. Many participants in RTCs **experienced an increase in their sense of Aboriginal identity.** VACCA workers reported this being a visible change in the participants from the beginning of the process, through to its conclusion. Staff reported that participants increased their knowledge of their mob, further developed their Aboriginal identity, and felt increased confidence and pride in expressing their identity.

Additionally, the evaluation demonstrated that **RTCs were an important part of the healing process for some participants,** with both **RTC participants and their families on Country reporting increased connection, bonds and relationships with each other as a result of the RTC and related activities.** The evaluation demonstrated the importance of ensuring that VACCA staff delivering the RTC program have the skills required to support this healing process and to navigate the associated family and relationship dynamics.

Interestingly, staff also reported that they experienced a stronger understanding of the collective trauma and grief experienced by Aboriginal people. This was not a planned outcome of the initial program logic.

For the sample of RTCs included in this evaluation, the program successfully achieved the medium-term outcomes in the program logic:

- Children and young people enjoyed their visits and had a meaningful narrative for themselves
- Children and young people experienced cultural connectedness in a safe and supported environment
- Children, young people and carers gained increased knowledge of their culture
- Children and young people received opportunities to develop stronger support networks
- Children and young people gained a strengthened sense of cultural connection and identity as an Aboriginal person.

The available evidence suggests that the program is likely also contributing to achieving longer term outcomes (including lasting cultural connection, knowledge and pride), although these were not directly measured as part of this evaluation due to data limitations.

There are opportunities to better collect and share long term outcomes, impact and learnings

The RTC program is capturing medium and short-term outcomes for the participating children and young people, however there are several opportunities to further strengthen outcomes measurement and learning processes within the program. Current Reunion Reports only capture information from participants. The RTC program has had broad effects on the families on Country. **There are opportunities to capture outcomes for families who are part of RTC processes, through the development of more structured Reunion Proposal Forms and Reunion Report Forms.**

There are also **opportunities to develop processes to capture and record some of the long-term changes in participants' sense of identity, connection to Country and relationships with family.** This could be achieved through adopting structured debrief sessions between staff, and adopting new forms of narrative data collection, such as case studies, significant change stories and audio and visual recordings.

The evaluation also found that the potential **development of a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework to capture aggregated outcomes,** and ensuring staff have time and evaluation capacity, would encourage and provide space for more reflection. Given the complexity of the needs that VACCA's RTC program is trying to address, the capturing of outcomes, impacts and learning is crucial.

Overall conclusion

The RTC program sets out to address important needs for young Aboriginal people, in an environment in which both the young people and their extended families have often experienced a great deal of trauma. VACCA has developed a strong set of planning and risk management processes to support the RTC visits and these have been skilfully implemented by staff to make the visits a positive experience for those involved.

Despite only being able to look at a small sample of trips, the evaluation has found emerging evidence of strong positive outcomes for participants, as well as for extended family members and VACCA staff. The evaluation demonstrated that the Gandel Foundation funded RTC trips led to the achievement of the medium level outcomes which were planned in the program logic. Children and young people had enjoyable and meaningful RTCs, which led to an increase in their sense of Aboriginal identity, connection to culture and Country, stronger support networks and understanding of their own Aboriginal narrative.

Interviews with VACCA staff who had seen firsthand the results of the RTC program, combined with stories from the Reunion Report Forms, demonstrate the strength, importance and impact of the RTC process on the participants. Although RTCs were described as a very emotional and sometimes overwhelming experience, they are also a crucial step in a healing process as children and young people connect more deeply with Aboriginal identity, family, culture and Country.

The RTC program's robust selection, planning and follow up processes place it in good stead to continue to deliver strong outcomes and impacts in the future. VACCA is strongly encouraged to continue implementing this program and to further develop the model and data collection processes that support it.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendations for VACCA

- 1. Review referral criteria for the RTC program to ensure that sufficient cultural planning has occurred for incoming participants to enable effective planning of RTCs.**
- 2. Develop a participatory process to agree shared objectives or outcomes for an RTC trip before it is undertaken, with guidance for VACCA staff on how to resolve differences of opinion among stakeholders on this where they occur. This process could be documented in Reunion Proposal Forms.**
- 3. Ensure that the entire process of planning, undertaking and following-up on RTC trips is conducted through a trauma-informed approach, and that considerations relating to trauma for participants, family members and staff are covered in RTC planning documents including the Reunion Proposal Form where appropriate.**
- 4. Ensure that the staff involved with planning and undertaking each RTC trip have access to all the essential elements of capacity to successfully manage the process, including: (a) the skills to organise the trip logistics; (b) a strong and safe support relationship for the young person participating; (c) the relevant cultural knowledge to understand the Community context of the trip and to navigate local cultural requirements; and (d) the skills and experience to manage complex family dynamics. Consider a team staffing approach where relevant to ensure these aspects are covered.**
- 5. Consider the development of a more formalised follow up process to enable stronger participant and staff reflection, debriefing and reporting, and to strengthen connections to Country.**
- 6. Review support mechanisms and processes offered to staff and to family members on Country to ensure they are sufficient to respond to trauma and negative emotions that may be surfaced through RTC trips.**
- 7. Include outcomes for family members and VACCA staff in an updated program logic.**
- 8. Explore the possibility of developing a formal reflective practice process for staff as part of the RTC model. This could include the development of a guide and templates to support more structured debrief and reflection on RTC trips.**
- 9. Develop methods to gather information about the outcomes that may occur for families and Communities living on Country as a result of the RTCs, for example through phone interview, case studies, or audio and video recordings.**
- 10. Explore other methods through which narrative information about RTC outcomes could be gathered, including methods through which the voices of young people could be heard directly, such as audio and video recordings, significant change stories and case studies.**
- 11. Revise the Reunion Proposal and Reunion Report Forms to better support outcome measurement and learning:**
 - a. Document agreed outcomes and objectives for each RTC process**
 - b. Additional guidance on assessing the success of reunions and on recommendations.**

- 12. Clarify the overall responsibilities for the collection and oversight of data collection relating to the RTC program.***
- 13. Consider the development of a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework for the RTC program, supported by the Research and Evidence Development (RED) Team, which will enable VACCA to aggregate outcomes, impact and learning at a program level, supported by the RED team.***

Recommendations for Gandel Foundation

- 1. Continue the flexible funding to the VACCA RTC program to enable the program to have the time to address complex situations and dynamics.***

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a small-scale evaluation of Return to Country (RTC) trips coordinated by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and funded by Gandel Foundation, between 2018 and 2022. The evaluation was commissioned by VACCA and undertaken by Lirata Consulting (www.lirata.com). The report focuses on the Gandel-funded elements of VACCA's broader RTC program, however findings are relevant to other aspects of the program as staff worked under several different funding streams.

Although only a small part of VACCA's overall work, the RTC program is very significant for the people involved and this report discusses its importance in the lives of young Aboriginal people, their families and Communities.

1.1 Introducing VACCA and the Return to Country Program

VACCA is a state-wide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) servicing children, young people, families, and Community members, and it is the largest of its kind in Australia. Its aims to support culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal Communities through more than fifty programs across Victoria. Together with the Aboriginal Community, VACCA designs, develops and delivers programs that build on peoples' strengths. These are built on an understanding of intergenerational trauma, and that healing occurs in the context of developing relationships, connection to culture, Community, and Country.

VACCA began implementing the RTC program in 2015 through a pilot in Gippsland funded by the Department of Families, Fairness & Housing (DFFH – previously titled the Department of Health and Human Services). In collaboration with the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative (GEGAC), VACCA developed the RTC program model and Framework including a practice guide to support the implementation of the program.

RTC aims to strengthen an Aboriginal child or young person's cultural connections and understanding of the relatedness between cultural values, beliefs and practices, Country, personal identity, family, clan and Community, history, symbolism, cultural expression and events. The program allows children and young people who live in out-of-home care the opportunity to travel to their home Country to meet Elders, visit sites, share knowledge and learnings about songs, stories, art, tracks, places, landforms, plants, animals and natural resources.

RTC is a celebration of Aboriginal cultural practice. It recognises the impact of disconnection of identity, health and wellbeing and is about knowing who you are, where you come from and what this means. The programs incorporate people, land, water, language, kinship systems, lore, knowledge, beliefs and spirituality. It is about shared history and shared memories, healing and resilience, survival and pride.

RTC presents an opportunity for healing for children and young people, their families, their carers and their Communities. While not an intended outcome for the program, RTC also offers opportunities for staff healing. It aims to focus on the needs of the child or young person and be responsive to their strengths, cultural hopes, aspirations and any worries they may have. All Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care, regardless of age and circumstance can be supported to undertake an RTC trip. The process considers both the mother's and father's Country, and is not a linear process.

In 2019, VACCA developed a Program Logic for the current RTC program which describes the activities and outputs, as well as desired short, medium and long-term outcomes for participating children and young people and their carers. This will be updated as part of the evaluation.

1.2 Guide to this report

- Chapter 2 outlines the **evaluation design**, including the key evaluation questions, data collection methods, key stakeholders and ethical considerations
- Chapter 3 outlines findings and recommendations in relation to the **process** of planning and delivering RTC trips, covering the identification and engagement of participants and the process of planning, delivering and following up on an RTC trip
- Chapter 4 outlines findings and recommendations in relation to **outcomes** for participants and other stakeholders, focusing on the outcomes delivered through Gandel Foundation funding of RTCs
- Chapter 5 outlines findings and recommendations in relation to **data collection and measurement of outcomes**, including suggestions for how VACCA could more effectively capture and report learning and outcomes.
- Chapter 6 provides an overall **conclusion**, including brief responses to each of the key evaluation questions.

2 EVALUATION DESIGN

This chapter outlines the design of the evaluation, including context, scope, purpose, focus and key questions which guided the process of data collection.

2.1 Evaluation context and scope

In 2018 VACCA received funding from Gandel Foundation to implement a further 25 RTC trips, additional to those funded by DFFH. As part of this funding VACCA agreed to undertake an evaluation of the RTC program including data collection from case workers, carers, young people and their families to identify, and better understand the programs impact on young people's sense of belonging, cultural knowledge and connections. VACCA partnered with not-for-profit evaluation provider Lirata Consulting to undertake this evaluation based on a project scope developed by VACCA.

At the time the original evaluation project commenced (late 2019), nine of 25 RTC trips had been completed with a further 16 planned for completion between December 2019 and April 2020. However, as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020, no more RTC trips were able to be implemented. This means that it has now been more than two years since children and young people participated in RTCs.

Given these circumstances, the evaluation brief was scaled back to draw primarily on existing data in regard to the nine completed trips (e.g. program documents, completed Reunion Proposals and Reunion Reports), complemented by additional interviews with the VACCA Case Workers who had attended past RTC with children and young people.

This evaluation covers the Gandel-funded trips that were a part of the VACCA RTC program. As the Gandel-funded trips were implemented as part of the overall service offering and in the same way, the evaluation findings and recommendations are likely to also be applicable to the broader RTC program.

2.2 Evaluation purpose and focus

The purpose of the evaluation is to continue to identify ways in which program delivery could be strengthened or improved, and to the extent possible based on existing data and VACCA staff/management interviews, understand the participants experiences' of RTC program delivery and the possible benefits of the program. The intended audience for the evaluation is key staff and managers at VACCA, Gandel Foundation and any other interested stakeholders.

Key Evaluation Questions

The key evaluation questions were agreed through engagement and discussion with VACCA staff, and were used as a guide and framework for the development of interview guides, and to structure the data analysis.

TABLE 1: EVALUATION DOMAINS AND QUESTIONS

EVALUATION DOMAIN	DEFINITION	EVALUATION QUESTION
Appropriateness	Fit between program intent, design, and context, including suitability to the needs of	1. What is the program logic underpinning the model?

EVALUATION DOMAIN	DEFINITION	EVALUATION QUESTION
	beneficiaries and other stakeholders.	
Process	Implementation of activities, service quality and stakeholder satisfaction, and the supporting systems and structures (governance, management, partnerships etc.) that contribute to program delivery.	2. What have been the achievements and challenges of delivering the RTC program over the past three years? 3. How can the program better measure its emergent benefits and outcomes?
Effectiveness	The extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups.	4. How well and to what extent does the program achieve its intended outcomes?
Sustainability	The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue, or are likely to continue.	5. In what ways do staff feel the program could be improved?

2.3 Evaluation roles, approach and methods

Roles

Lirata's team members working on this evaluation included:

- **Alex Gruenewald**, Consultant (Evaluation Specialist) – Project Lead
- **Dr. Jillian Marsh**, Associate Consultant – Project Team Member
- **Kate Randall**, Senior Consultant (Research & Evaluation Lead) – Project Team Member
- **Mark Planigale**, CEO – Project Oversight

Evaluation oversight and coordination was provided on behalf of VACCA by **Kerry Brogan**, Senior Manager, Research and Evidence Development. RTC staff were engaged during the early stages of designing the evaluation, including developing the program logic and overall methodology.

Approach

The evaluation utilised a participatory approach to designing the evaluation plan and conducting the data collection. Throughout the evaluation, Lirata ensured that there was an appropriate Aboriginal cultural lens applied. Interviews were conducted by Dr. Jillian Marsh, an Adnyamathanha researcher and Community linguist. Dr. Marsh also provided feedback on the design of the evaluation plan and data collection tools, and contributed to the development of the evaluation findings.

Methods

Planning for the evaluation commenced in 2019/2020, but was put on hold due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID impacts required a revision to the plan, and this impacted on the ability of the evaluation to hear directly from the children and young people involved. The table below outlines the planning, data collection and analysis methods that were used as part of the revised evaluation.

TABLE 2: EVALUATION METHODS

METHOD	WHEN?	DETAILS AND PARTICIPANTS?
Development of evaluation plan	February 2020, revised March 2022	Developed by Lirata, using feedback from VACCA Senior Research and Policy Manager and other key VACCA staff.
Development of data collection tools	March 2020, revised March 2022	Developed by Lirata, using feedback from VACCA Senior Research and Policy Manager and other key VACCA staff.
Collection of background documents	2020 – 2022	Key programming documents including background documents and completed Reunion Proposal and Reunion Report Forms.
VACCA staff and manager interviews	April and May 2022	5 individual interviews conducted with key VACCA staff and managers involved in the process of planning and delivering RTCs. In addition, 1 participant submitted answers by email. Interviews were conducted online.
Data analysis and synthesis	May 2022	Analysis of data from: - Stakeholder interviews - Reunion Proposal Forms (4) - Reunion Report Forms (4) Synthesis through thematic analysis of data collected. This consisted of identifying themes relating to the key evaluation questions.
Evaluation team sense making workshop	May 2022	An internal workshop for evaluation team members to discuss the emerging findings.
Stakeholder sense making workshop	May 2022	A workshop including evaluation team members and VACCA staff to discuss the emerging findings.
Review of Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form	May 2022	Lirata staff reviewed the templates to provide further suggestions on how better capture outcomes, impacts and learning.

METHOD	WHEN?	DETAILS AND PARTICIPANTS?
Updates to program Logic	June 2022	Using the findings of the evaluation, Lirata will update the RTC program logic to better reflect outcomes.

Ethics

The evaluation has been conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council 2007, updated 2018), and in accordance with Australian Evaluation Society's Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations (2013). Formal ethics approval was not sought as the evaluation was intended for internal quality improvement by VACCA rather than for external publication, and did not engage with or collect any new data from RTC participants or their families or Community members.

Informed consent was gathered from stakeholders prior to interviews. All data collected was stored in encrypted form on Lirata's secure file sharing platform. The interviews were transcribed, and copies of the transcripts were submitted to VACCA's RED Team. During the process of the evaluation, only Lirata evaluation team members and the VACCA project manager had access to this information.

Limitations

The evaluation was able to access documentary data about only a small number of RTC trips. Findings from documentary data therefore do not support quantitative findings and cannot be generalised to the whole of VACCA's RTC program.

A second key limitation within this evaluation is the lack of direct voice from Aboriginal children and young people. Although efforts have been made to consider the perspectives of young people throughout the findings, it is important to note that the perspectives and views held by interviewees do not represent the values, beliefs or priorities of children/young people.

3 FINDINGS: RETURN TO COUNTRY PROCESS

This section presents evaluation findings related to the process of planning, delivering and following up on RTC trips. Process means the implementation of activities, and the supporting systems and structures (governance, management, partnerships etc.) that contribute to program delivery. Findings from this section draw from interviews with staff and managers and analysis of Reunion Proposals and Reunion Reports. This section explores how participants in RTC trips were identified and engaged, how the trips were planned, delivered and how any follow up processes were conducted.

3.1 Selection of participants

Participants were identified through robust internal VACCA processes and informed advice

The selection of participants is crucial to ensuring a meaningful and successful RTC trip, and overcoming any complexities. Many participants were internally referred to the RTC program through existing channels within VACCA, and from other programs. This was both proactive on the part of the staff running the program, and reactive based on opportunities presented while delivering the program. Young people participating in various other VACCA programs including kinship care (Out-of-Home Care program), Family Services and First Supports were involved in the RTC trips funded by Gandel Foundation. VACCA staff handled the identification of potential participants in the program. This was achieved through staff developing relationships and meeting with key team leaders from internal VACCA programs, in order to identify potential children and families who may be interested to participate in an RTC.

Participants who could potentially benefit were prioritised for RTC trips

The evaluation did not reveal or review a formalised, documented process for selecting participants. Criteria for selection of participants were varied, but VACCA staff looked for children who were already in the system who could benefit from an RTC, and did not already have a level of connection to Community or one that was easily accessible. Accessibility refers to geographical or logistical linkages to Country and family. Prior to receipt of the Gandel Foundation funding, some children had been in the out-of-home-care system for over ten years without being identified for an RTC trip, which was an occasional source of tension, and needed management by program staff. Limited funding meant that less RTCs were available, and sometimes participants' needs were assessed as being too complex to allow for their participation. In this context, the increased funding provided by the Gandel Foundation created opportunities to participate that did not exist before.

Interviewees also provided feedback that some families and children within the VACCA family services program were identified as potentially benefiting a great deal from participating in the program, despite their high levels of complexity and vulnerability. Decision-making on participation could sometimes be complex as staff weighed up the potential benefits for young people and families with the potential risks that might be present, and the level of support that would be needed to enable the trips to occur safely.

Other interviewees highlighted that there was cultural element, related to your birthright as an Aboriginal person, to the selection process for those undertaking an RTC.

“Well, it’s your birthright. Selection is based on your heritage and how you identify and what you want for yourself....It comes down to what you want as a First Nations person. How you want to be able to live and learn and breathe your culture is how you see yourself from the

start. Your birthright comes with that, and we all come from different stages of what that means, and it needs to be nurtured with the spirit of our people for you to grow and be strong, and when you're ready, to have that implemented properly" VACCA staff interview

This cultural element was driven by an understanding which is also reflected within the Return to Country Framework, that Aboriginal culture is a birthright, and begins as soon as an Aboriginal person is born.

Feedback was also received that some trips were unable to go ahead if the child or young person did not have an extensive knowledge or connection of their own Aboriginal history and family lineage. This was a challenge when receiving referrals without any prior connection to families on Country. The process of ensuring that a participant has this connection or knowledge should be linked to their cultural support plan, however, this was not always able to be the process which was followed.

"But also a lot of children sadly don't know their Countries and mobs, so a lot of children are – it's not going to be something that is doable, you know, when you don't have family and Elders that you can consult with and a Country, so to speak." VACCA staff interview

Finally, some potential participants were excluded due to having already had an RTC to the same destination with separate funding at VACCA.

3.2 Planning of RTC trips

Planning RTCs was complex and time consuming, and required balancing competing opinions and viewpoints

A major theme reported during the interviews was the complexity and time needed to successfully organise the logistics of RTC trips. There is a need to ensure that sufficient time is factored into planning processes and timelines to enable the different factors relating to the situation and needs of the young person and their family to be considered.

Many interviewees reported that they needed to accommodate the views of multiple people, both within VACCA and without, and balance them with the needs of the participant.

"Yeah. And because there is so many different people with their own feelings – one of the things that I did find consistently that was difficult was different agendas from different people involved. So, like, a parent or a carer or a child protection worker or a kinship worker were all looking from different angles. And even a young person is looking from a different angle. So they've all got their own feeling of what should happen or how it should happen, or what's more important, and trying to bring that together into one cohesive trip and making sure that it's safe, it's going to be a positive experience, that all of those elements are being met for the young person that the trip is about was very challenging at times." VACCA Staff interview

This meant that it was challenging to assess what the best outcome would be for the child or young person who was participating in the RTC. Lack of clarity on intended outcomes has the potential to undermine the success of the trip. This could be addressed through a more participatory process for setting goals and objectives for the RTC trip at the beginning of the process, and some support for case workers and VACCA staff in resolving different viewpoints held by different stakeholders. This process could involve key stakeholders for the child or young person, including their case worker, family members and others.

The RTC program had a part time Project Officer, working across the different streams of the entire program (including Gandel Foundation funded trips). They were responsible for coordinating selection of participants, planning and aspects of the delivery.

After the RTC Project Officer had identified a list of potential participants, the Executive Manager and Project Officer jointly discussed and determined the eligibility of participants, with the relevant Executive Manager having the final say over the list of participants. Following this process, the Project Officer completed a template which covered all aspects of finance, participants, families, which staff would attend, destination and cultural activities planned (the Reunion Proposal Form). Interviewees highlighted that the Project Officer had had various roles within VACCA, including case management with similar programs, finance and administration. They also highlighted the person's internal knowledge of VACCA, the processes, and the different teams, as a key advantage.

"... because that program was something under my portfolio... it crossed Better Futures as well as a voluntary program that we had called Empower Youth – we looked at [those programs] as our first port of call. But what we also did was we would talk and explain what this program was about and its availability at our regional staff meetings, so that that opportunity was available across all our programs. There was also a couple of specific meetings with the out-of-home care teams so that we could really open it up to children in out-of-home care as a priority group." VACCA staff interview

Complex family dynamics meant that organising logistics was sometimes challenging

Staff interviews revealed that one of the most challenging aspects of organising a successful RTC was contacting and communicating with family on Country. If there had been no prior investigation done into the child's background, it was often hard to know where to start undertaking the planning.

Additionally, the families on Country often had highly complex family dynamics which could be challenging to manage and negotiate. These included trauma and complex relationships that meant that organising the logistics of visits would be difficult, or the lengthy amount of time required to navigate these issues meant that the trip may not have gone ahead.

There can also be sensitivities in relation to attendance on the trip by various carers, especially if the RTC participant requests their attendance.

"Sometimes there are sensitivities, because I think the kinship carer probably wanted to come along with the participants, but it was a very complicated family dynamic, and maybe she felt quite vulnerable because she wasn't there. I think that's maybe – yeah, it's a complex family situation because I think there was a view that if she came along, the participants wouldn't be able to participate fully with family, that it would – but I think maybe for her – often we don't take the carers, the kinship carers." VACCA staff interview

These family dynamics also appeared to play a part in the selection of the participants for RTC trips. Some feedback was received that although the child or young person may benefit from an RTC, they may not have been prioritised because of the difficulty of the logistics and organisation. The presence of family members on trips also added an extra layer of complexity to managing the trips for the VACCA staff, as sometimes these family members had their own complex care needs. Family dynamics will always be an

inherent part of any RTC trip, and need to be considered as part of planning, risk assessment and support arrangements for young people and family members throughout the process.

When staff have the right levels of capacity and experience to deliver the program, RTCs are more likely to be successful

Some staff interviewees reported that the logistical process of organising, delivering and following up on RTCs was highly challenging when staff did not have support or relevant experience to deliver on these extensive logistics. Logistical challenges include the need to have an in depth understanding of cultural practices of families on Country, and how to effectively manage these to deliver an RTC. It also often required having access to communication lines to the families on Country, or to a person who can facilitate these links. Staff also needed to have the ability to be flexible, as circumstances affecting the planning and delivering the trips can change rapidly. When these are in place, RTCs are more likely to be successful and lead to strong outcomes for the child or young person. This also links into the finding: “Cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal staff, including selecting Aboriginal staff to lead the process, was key in planning a successful trip. “

“I think it was pretty overwhelming. Like, for one case manager who was almost – there was an expectation that she was to facilitate this trip to central Australia for this young man who was turning 18, and I think that caused her a significant amount of stress for a long time, because she didn’t have any of the local knowledge. But it was sort of put on her that, yeah, this young man needs to be prioritised for this trip, but as a case manager it was just so overwhelming for her. Like, “Where do I start?” So I think that was – there’s a lot placed on individual case managers who often don’t have the experience.” VACCA staff interview

A potential approach to ensure that staff can adapt to and deal with challenges is to adopt a team model, in which each of the members covers off a key capacity. This would consist of team members with skills in logistics, a case manager who has a relationship and knowledge of the young person, and someone from within VACCA or externally who has local knowledge of where the young person is travelling to. This could reduce the pressures on individual staff members. The challenge of capacity pressures on VACCA staff and caseworkers was a reoccurring theme.

Cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal staff, including selecting Aboriginal staff to lead the process, was key in planning a successful trip.

A majority of participants highlighted that of the planning and delivery of RTCs was more likely to be successful when led by an Aboriginal staff member, due to their understanding of and connection to cultural processes. Participants provided feedback that VACCA staff that were Aboriginal were more likely to have a strong understanding of cultural processes.

“If you don’t have the cultural background yourself to understand that, no, hang on, there’s a separation here. This is something to do with men’s business or women’s business, and it shouldn’t be crossing over. Only an Aboriginal person can really pinpoint that accurately.” VACCA staff interview

This includes understanding the importance of face-to-face planning with the Communities or families who were participating in an RTC trip. Interviewees highlighted that a successful trip was often enabled by a face-to-face meeting or an existing relationship, during which the importance of returning to Country for the participant could be highlighted. It was also an opportunity for detailed logistical planning to be completed, which enabled a smooth running of the trip. A key example of this type of extensive

preplanning was one RTC which took place both in Broome, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory. As part of the preplanning for the trip, a VACCA senior cultural advisor undertook a visit to Broome and the Northern Territory, where they met with the family and the paternal grandmother in both Broome as well as family in the Northern Territory. The trip focused on outlining the process of Return to Country, what the family and Elders might like to do with the child, and whether this would be possible.

It also includes an increased awareness of following the correct cultural protocol for engaging with Aboriginal Communities. Interviewees highlighted that understanding differences in cultural perceptions, particularly around timelines, helped break down some of the barriers to a successful RTC trip. Local knowledge, including the cultural practices of the Aboriginal group, their connection to Country and the local context, was crucial to successful planning.

“It’s a pretty significant amount of planning. I couldn’t even imagine doing that unless you’ve got local knowledge.” VACCA staff interview

When trips were accompanied by a process of grounding the child or young person within their culture, they were often more likely to be delivered successfully. This process was often led by an Aboriginal staff member who had built respect, rapport and developed a process of understanding where the young person “was at” within their own connection to Country.

“So on that basis of that songline and law that’s passed through our generations is my responsibility is to find where that is without judgement, to sit there with that young person, build that respect and rapport, and be grounded on what it is to be First Nations, and then we can start a discussion of Return to Country when the time is right.” VACCA staff interview

3.3 Delivery of RTC trips

The process of delivering RTC trips was dynamic and involved a lot of ongoing management

Successful delivery of RTC trips required both the management of the needs of the child or young person who was on the trip, and often the needs of the people accompanying the young person. VACCA staff also needed to ensure that some of the children they were accompanying with were checked in on often for their welfare.

It also involved constant refreshing of plans, including consistently contacting and engaging family and relatives who were part of the RTC process to ensure that activities went ahead as planned, or could be adjusted and rescheduled as needed.

This also involved issues outside of the control of VACCA staff, such as changing environmental conditions which can affect the logistics of a trip (such as bushfires).

“There was another trip we were trying to plan because there was bushfires, so there’s always those elements that you can’t control what occurred, so it just became to a point where that travel was not safe, because if we sent them to that area and then it became cut off, that’s a risk that you can’t afford to put them in. So there’s a lot of different elements that came into play at different times.” VACCA staff interview

The dynamic and complex processes of RTC trips mean that there needs to be flexibility built into timelines during delivery. This can allow for staff to respond to unexpected events or participant needs. It also speaks to the need for staff to have a broad skillset and/or knowledge of mechanisms and approaches which can allow them to manage some of the more complex family dynamics which occur during the trips.

Consideration should be given to any potential trauma held by the young person or child when organising and delivering an RTC

A strongly reoccurring theme in the data analysis was that many of the participants on RTCs faced complex, inter-generational trauma which was an important factor to consider during the planning and delivery of RTCs. Although staff may be aware of this during the selection and planning process, these issues may emerge or compound at any stage of an RTC.

“Compounded by often the increased complexity and trauma that a lot of Aboriginal young people hold. So [staff] workload can be quite extensive, and so when sometimes other opportunities come on board – and I can’t speak for the [program name] team, but I know we feel this in the [program name] that sometimes they can’t be fully embraced or harnessed, so sometimes that can impact maybe on the quality of how it’s implemented, or their ability to support the program as well.” VACCA staff interview

It was often important to also ensure that VACCA staff members implementing the RTC were aware, and managing the expectations of, the child who was participating in the RTC journey.

“Yeah. And it’s important, because we need to make kids feel happy and safe, and it’s very nerve racking for them as well, going with a heap of people they don’t know, because they’re disconnected, not understanding. Some see it as a holiday, but some kids knew it was about reconnecting with Country and family.

Q: And there must have been a whole heap of expectations and tensions around that for the children as well as for the adults that were involved in it?

A: Yeah, definitely.” VACCA staff interview

Although VACCA has extensive frameworks for managing trauma, and staff working to organise and deliver RTC processes have strong skills and capacity to manage this, Reunion Proposal Forms have the potential to better systematically record what potential issues may emerge, as well as strategies for dealing with them. This speaks to the importance of a VACCA staff member who knows and already has a strong relationship with the young person being available to provide support before, during and after the experience. Without this established support relationship, the experience could potentially be less safe for the young person.

Prompt follow ups were important in ensuring sustained connections

The follow up process after RTC trips was focused on ensuring that the connection developed through the RTC process was maintained and enhanced. VACCA staff and managers who were interviewed discussed ensuring that the RTC participant was encouraged to “keep the window open” through the sending of letters, phone calls or photos. They also encouraged carers to ensure that if another trip was planned, that it would be done within a short period of time following the initial RTC. This is to ensure that any connections are not lost, and to explore if there are any opportunities for ongoing connections and bond which can enhance the development of the participant.

The evaluation did not reveal whether there was a formalised process for follow ups. The Reunion Report Form has a brief section focusing on follow up, however it does not provide guidance on what this looks like. Potential considerations for VACCA include exploring opportunities to create a formalised process, which could include space for participant and staff reflection, debriefing and reporting. This would support participants to make sense of the experience, and lead to a stronger, sustained connection between the child or young person their Country.

RTCs may be better understood as a process rather than a one-off activity

Although it can be easy to see RTC trips as one-off events, there is an extended process that sits around preparing for, undertaking and reflecting on these trips. Cultural learning, and the personal healing process that accompanies it, takes time. Interviewees shared that there are opportunities to strengthen ties between RTC participants and their Country through considering shorter, repeat RTCs wherever possible. This could take the form of an initial, brief trip, before presenting the RTC participants with an opportunity for additional return visits. This might progressively identify more family and deeper family histories which can further enhance connection, identity and belonging and support healing over time.

Funding from Gandel Foundation provided the program with flexibility to plan effectively

Interviewees provided feedback that they were able to overcome planning challenges and effectively deliver the RTC activities as a result of the nature of the Gandel Foundation funding. Interviewees highlighted that the amount of funding allowed for flexibility in its planning, delivery and follow-up.

“... The program was so generously funded by the Gandel Foundation, which made all this possible. But if we didn’t – there was significant, you know, like family members in Broome came to Darwin. You know, like, with the other young man who was able to travel to many Communities, and if it wasn’t for VACCA, would they have the means to do that themselves? So maybe that could be an issue for them. Or maybe it was uncomfortable for them that a lot of things were paid for. I don’t know. It’s hard to know how people...” VACCA staff interview

Flexible funding arrangements are a key enabler in ensuring that staff can iteratively deliver a program as complex and nuanced as RTC. The funding allowed for VACCA to ensure that time and capacity (including cultural capacity) was built into the planning, delivery and follow up of RTCs. Some feedback was received that there could be additional funding allocated to outcomes measurement and follow up reporting from the children and young people.

3.4 Recommendations

Recommendations for VACCA

- 1. Review referral criteria for the RTC program to ensure that sufficient cultural planning has occurred for incoming participants to enable effective planning of RTCs.*
- 2. Develop a participatory process to agree shared objectives or outcomes for an RTC trip before it is undertaken, with guidance for VACCA staff on how to resolve differences of opinion among stakeholders on this where they occur. This process could be documented in Reunion Proposal Forms.*
- 3. Ensure that the entire process of planning, undertaking and following-up on RTC trips is conducted through a trauma-informed approach, and that considerations relating to trauma for participants, family members and staff are covered in RTC planning documents including the Reunion Proposal Form where appropriate.*
- 4. Ensure that the staff involved with planning and undertaking each RTC trip have access to all the essential elements of capacity to successfully manage the process, including: (a) the skills to organise the trip logistics; (b) a strong and safe support relationship for the young person participating; (c) the relevant cultural knowledge to understand the Community context of the trip and to navigate local cultural requirements; and (d) the skills and experience to manage complex family dynamics. Consider a team staffing approach where relevant to ensure these aspects are covered.*
- 5. Consider the development of a more formalised follow up process to enable stronger participant and staff reflection, debriefing and reporting, and to strengthen connections to Country.*

Recommendations for Gandel Foundation

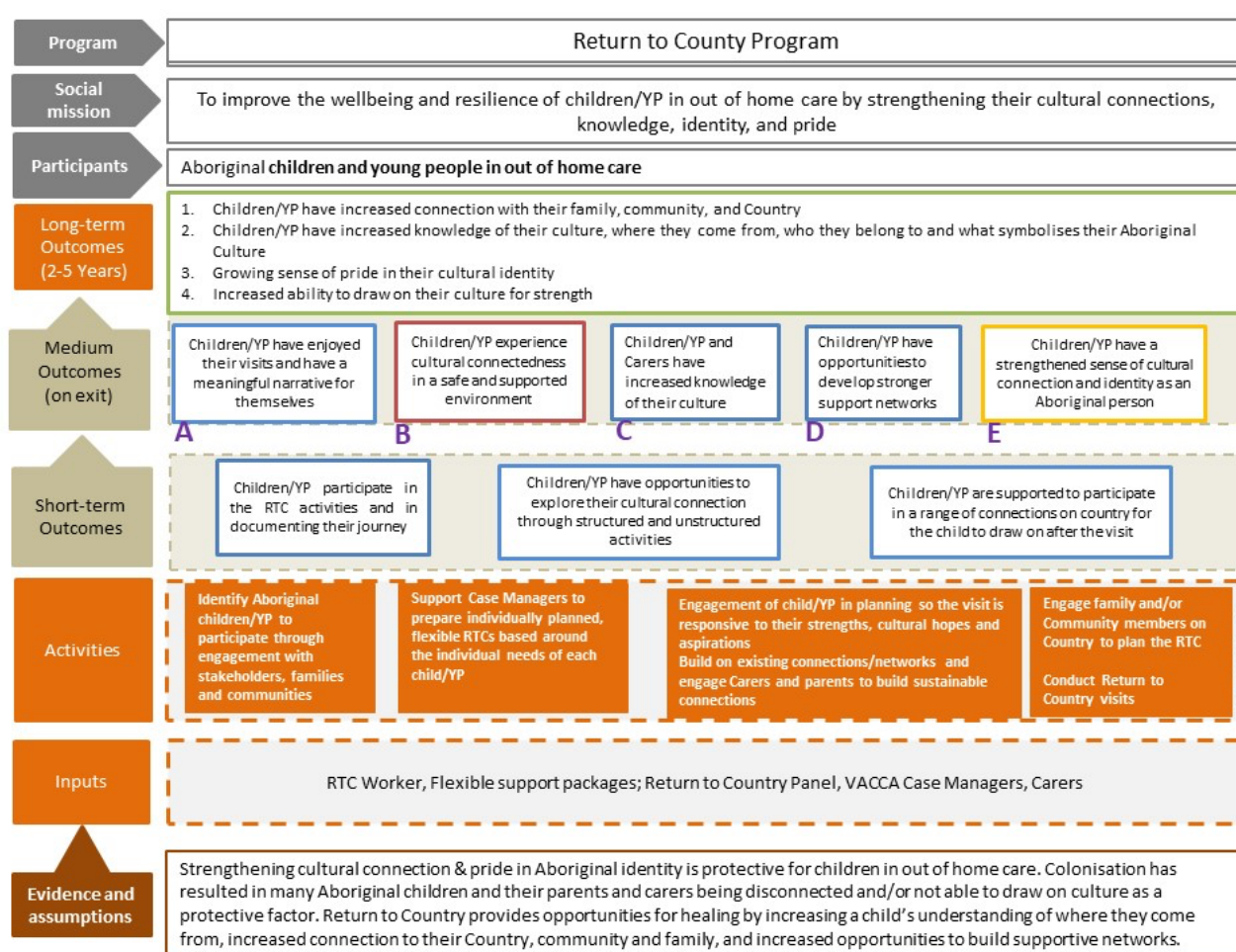
- 1. Continue the flexible funding to the VACCA RTC program to enable the program to have the time to address complex situations and dynamics.*

4 FINDINGS: RETURN TO COUNTRY OUTCOMES

This section focuses on the outcomes for children and young people, family members and VACCA staff which were revealed as part of the RTC evaluation. They are organised under the themes that emerged during the data analysis and synthesis, and the beneficiary groups.

A program logic was developed by VACCA through participatory approaches with program staff, including those who had participated in organising and delivering RTC trips. The RTC program logic is organised under short, medium and long term outcomes. All outcomes are focused on children and young people as beneficiaries. This is presented below.

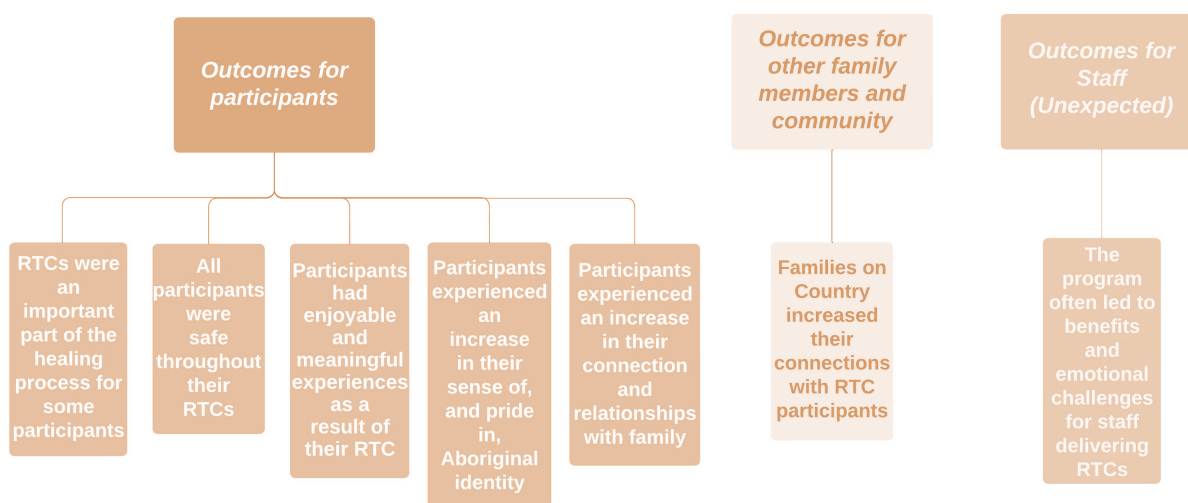
FIGURE 1: RTC PROGRAM LOGIC



The evaluation revealed that for the RTC trips which were able to be reviewed by the evaluation team, all of the medium term outcomes were achieved as part of the program and funding. Although it is suspected that the program is contributing to and realising some of its longer term outcomes, the data collection and analysis cannot provide clear evidence of this due to the limitations of the process.

In addition to these outcomes, the evaluation also revealed that there were a few outcomes for groups that were not reflected in the program logic, including families on Country and VACCA staff. The outcomes linked to each of these groups is shown below. It shows the key potential groups (participants, family members, broader Community and staff) and the observed outcomes for each of them.

FIGURE 2: OUTCOMES BY BENEFICIARY GROUPS



The following section outlines these outcomes in more detail.

4.1 Outcomes for children and young people (participants)

All participants were safe throughout their RTCs, and VACCA staff invested time and capacity in ensuring the safety of participants.

Both interviews with VACCA staff and a review of the Reunion Proposals and Reunion Reports provided by VACCA showed the importance and focus that VACCA placed on ensuring that participants were safe throughout the process of planning and delivering their RTC. This is linked to medium term outcome B: Children/Young People experience cultural connectedness in a safe and supported environment within the VACCA program logic.

VACCA staff interviews highlighted the extensive safety considerations and frameworks that were in place to protect participants before, during and after their RTC trips. These included specific risk assessments by Family Services, as well as daily risk assessments by VACCA workers who accompanied children and young people on their RTCs.

Interviewees highlighted that the RTCs could be potentially challenging for the participant due to cultural shock. In one example, an RTC was challenging for the participant as they had been raised in an urban “largely middle class” environment, and their family members (who lived in a rural/remote area) were experiencing extensive trauma as well as substance abuse.

Despite these challenges, VACCA workers were highly aware, and able to deal with, complex problems which presented during the RTCs trips. These included dealing with complex family dynamics, the stress of long travel and emotional reunions, and the uncertainty of the COVID period.

“Obviously for one of them, just the children’s safety and well-being. One of them, like a [person] who wasn’t in care, was part of that trip and she was very much included. It was an interesting sibling dynamic. So that was something that we had to closely keep an eye on and manage.” VACCA staff interview

Although there were risks and challenges present as part of the RTCs trips, the processes put in to keep participants safe were robust. Young people who were part of the RTC trips which were analysed as part of this evaluation were safe, to an appropriate level, and felt safe.

Participants had enjoyable and meaningful experiences as a result of their RTC

Data analysis revealed that RTC participants overwhelmingly enjoyed their experience, both in terms of the cultural knowledge and activities which were a part of their trip, and the general experience of meeting and spending time with their family members. This is linked to medium outcome A: Children/Young People have enjoyed their visits and have a meaningful narrative for themselves in the program logic.

In one example, the RTC Reunion Report demonstrated that the child’s favourite activity of the trip was hunting for Bati (Witchetty grub) with their extended family on Country. Reunion Reports also highlighted participants progressively gaining confidence in engaging with other family members through their experiences on Country, and gaining a sense that the RTC process was trustworthy and culturally safe.

Participants in RTCs experienced an increase in their sense of, and pride in, Aboriginal identity

Both Reunion Reports and staff interviews strongly highlighted the increased sense of Aboriginal identity experienced by participants on RTC trips. VACCA workers reported this being a visible change in the participants from the beginning of the process, through to its conclusion. This is linked to medium outcome E: Children/Young People have a strengthened sense of cultural connection and identity as an Aboriginal person, and medium outcome C: Children/Young People and Carers have increased knowledge of their culture in the program logic.

One caseworker reported that she often saw a change in the confidence of participants in being able to identify and express their own Aboriginal identity and that of their mob.

“If you asked them who their mob was, they didn’t know. They couldn’t really answer that. And after those trips, they had that certainty. You could ask them that and they would proudly say, “This is my mob. This is where we’re from.” And just being able to have that confidence and that pride out of that experience was really, really awesome to see.” VACCA staff interview

Examples of strengthened Aboriginal identity included participants being given new names by their family and mob as part of cultural processes. One participant took part in a welcoming ceremony, and was given a new name relating to his cultural heritage. Other participants were reported to have learned about art and painting styles that were specific to their cultural group and family lineage, and were continuing to use these as an ongoing expression of identity.

The use of language to strengthen Aboriginal identity amongst participants was also highlighted during the data collection process. Interviewees highlighted that the usage of relevant Aboriginal languages gave participants a sense of their own role within the cultural group and family.

“Getting them to associate themselves with title in language gives them a spiritual connection to their Country. We need to revert back to our language for them to understand that they

come from a greater place. Utilising English is too much of a common practice. Therefore my role, and particularly if they are Yorta, is to get them to learn their language, is to learn their identity, to have a direct line to their ancestors.”- VACCA staff interview

Qualitative data suggests that building Aboriginal identity leads to positive longer-term outcomes for participants, however this could be demonstrated by stronger follow up processes. Evaluation data collection also highlighted that the RTC process can be an important step in a broader process for the child or young person. Interviews with VACCA staff demonstrated that often the participant was encouraged to explore their own cultural and familial background further, outside of the program. Outcomes measurement tools could be expanded to capture this (see Chapter 5: Data collection and measurement of outcomes).

RTCs were an important part of the healing process for some participants

Both Reunion Reports and interviews with VACCA staff highlighted that RTCs can play an important role in healing trauma and mental health issues.

“Meeting with family members and exploring the Island was extremely important for [the participant’s] healing process. He was proud of being an Aboriginal man and discovered so much history and such strong family roots hearing the stories and seeing artefacts that his Auntie was showing him. [The participant] was able to meet more than 20 family members and heard their stories. Auntie [name] told him stories about family members, showed him numerous pics.” Reunion Report

The contribution to the healing process related to the trauma of dispossession of place and removal. It was clear from staff interviews that the experience of RTC provided the participants with a sense of grounding, of strengthened identity which contributed to a feeling of safety, and of connection and improved understanding of oneself.

“Overwhelming. The tears. You know, like when you take someone home that’s been wanting to get home so long, you carry that – you can’t help but feel that sadness as well, because all our First Nations people and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced that dispossession, what it is to be removed.” VACCA staff interview

The concept of collective grief was raised and discussed during both the internal and external sense making workshops with Lirata and VACCA staff. Participants in RTC trips experienced an increased understanding of the idea that their grief did not sit solely on their shoulders, but rather was part of a wider collective experience with other Aboriginal people.

Participants in RTCs experienced an increase in their connection and relationships with family (both on Country and outside of)

Evaluation data strongly demonstrated the importance of RTCs in increasing connections with family on Country. This is linked to medium term outcome D in the program logic: Children/Young People have opportunities to develop stronger support networks. All staff interviews and Reunion Reports showed examples of participants increasing their connection with their family. Interviewees described the process as overwhelming for the participants.

Additionally, there were some reported outcomes of participants building their connections with people who were not on RTC trips, but who shared a similar cultural background to the participant. Participants were able to strengthen friendship groups with others because of their shared identity.

“Yeah. But she learned a lot of traditional things down there, and she came back and shared it, because there are a couple of other kids who are from there but weren’t in the system, and she had a friendship group with them, and she was teaching them what she’d learned over there, and it was just beautiful thinking this child’s come away and embraced their culture and bringing it back here to share, which was nice.” VACCA staff interview

4.2 Outcomes for other family members and Community

Families on Country increased their connections with RTC participants

The interview process also revealed that families on Country reported strengthened bonds with their family members who took part in the RTC process. Interviews revealed that the families who had reconnected with RTC participants were interested in sustaining the relationships and connections that occurred as a result of the program.

“I think, like I said, it was somewhat sad because it did bring up their own – like, not sad for them, but it was just a sad thinking, you know, “My grandchild’s home,” or the kids are home, that you’re back, but it was a nice sad feeling. But I think it was a bit overwhelming as well for them. Like I said, when some families said they’d been in the system that long, why are you doing it now? But I think the majority of families were really, really happy, and “When can we do it again? Why don’t we do this more,” and “Can we come over and see you?”” VACCA staff interview

This highlighted that the RTC process also led to an increased sense of connection and identity for families on Country who participate. The RTC process can lead to an ongoing increase in connection, which is not an outcome in the program logic in its current form. This outcome could be included in a future iteration of the program logic.

4.3 Outcomes for VACCA staff

The program often led to benefits and emotional challenges for staff delivering RTCs (UNEXPECTED)

Staff who had worked on RTCs reported both positive and challenging emotions and learnings arising from their involvement. This outcome was unexpected as it was not included in the program logic for the RTC program.

For non-Aboriginal staff, the RTC program further emphasised the importance of culture and identity for Aboriginal Australians. This was not just limited to participants on RTCs, but led to some non-Aboriginal staff reflecting on the challenges faced by their Aboriginal counterparts as part of VACCA’s everyday work and projects.

“The staff that were involved in the ones (RTC Trips) that I was privy to were non-Indigenous staff as well, so it really I think helped them embrace the significance and importance of culture. And to see the impact, the incredibly positive, enriching impact on the young person

was mind blowing, I've got to say. So when it did happen, you know – but I think it also highlighted the complexity for them as well, that this isn't easy, and I guess the family history, the trauma, it raised those matters that we work with every day, and sometimes how difficult they can be for a young person as well, and for Aboriginal Community as well.” VACCA staff interview

Aboriginal staff also spoke of the RTC experience bringing up traumatic or negative emotions for them, especially in relation to their own family backgrounds. Some staff reflected that the process of delivering or organising the trips triggered emotions that from their own separation from family, history, land or culture. They reflected on the importance of practicing self-care throughout their work on the program.

“And I guess the self-care for yourself as well as a worker, because it can also impact yourself, especially dealing in Stolen Gen. I know that impacts me personally, and I deal with that, but some other people it might re-trigger as well.” VACCA staff interview

Need to ensure that Communities have support mechanisms in place to deal with any trauma from RTCs

VACCA staff interviewed as part of the evaluation provided feedback that although many of the Communities which hosted RTC trips had extensive cultural mechanisms in place to safeguard their members, it was important to ensure that they had access and linkages to professional support.

“Q: ... is there a support network for people like that back at Community level so that they feel like if they do have some further unpacking to do, or they have been retraumatised by something, that there's a support network in place to help them out?

A: Yeah, we'd make sure of that beforehand anyway, but we'd also speak to family, “Who's your go to if you're struggling,” so we knew they could – but the social emotional team's really good. They're a real good support. And I think Community in itself, just sitting around yarning about what's happened and how you're feeling is sometimes enough for our mob as well. But there's the professional support they can reach out to as well.” VACCA staff interview

This speaks to a need and opportunity for VACCA to continue to monitor the wellbeing of Communities during, and following trips. This could include identifying and building partnerships during the planning phase with local services that offer counselling, so that people on Country can be linked to support where needed.

No negative outcomes were identified as part of the process

Despite the risks and challenges inherent in RTC, no negative outcomes were identified. From the available evidence, the program managed to address and manage the emotional challenges and potential re-triggering of trauma for participants was able to be managed/addressed in a way that did not lead to substantial negative outcomes.

4.4 Recommendations

Recommendations for VACCA

- 6. Review support mechanisms and processes offered to staff and to family members on Country to ensure they are sufficient to respond to trauma and negative emotions that may be surfaced through RTC trips.**

- 
7. *Include outcomes for family members and VACCA staff in an updated program logic.*

5 FINDINGS: DATA COLLECTION AND MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES

This section discusses the measurement of outcomes and potential improvements to the ways in which the VACCA RTC program captures, reports and communicates learnings. It includes feedback from the interviews with VACCA staff, and an analysis of the Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form by Lirata. It is organised under the headings staff workload and capacity, and tools and approaches for collecting outcomes.

Outcomes data is captured through the Reunion Report Form. These reports are completed at the conclusion of all RTC trips and include questions around safety, activities, budget, quality of reunion, travel and recommendations. An evaluation form is mentioned in the Reunion Report Form, however, none of the documents analysed as part of the evaluation contained a completed version of this form.

5.1 Staff workload and capacity

Reflective practice, especially for a program that involves complex outcomes related to identity, connection and culture, is important in identifying outcomes, lessons learned and adapting to changing contexts. It can be challenging to undertake it in meaningful manner due to the time pressures faced by staff, and the reticence of RTC participants to discuss aspects of their trip that didn't go so well.

Key staff are collecting outcomes and learning data despite being responsible for a number of different tasks.

Heavy number of different tasks that staff workloads were responsible for was highlighted as a key barrier to improving measurement of outcomes, particularly at the participant level. VACCA staff provided feedback that although reflection is encouraged as part of the RTC process, this often falls to busy case workers who struggle to find the time or capacity to undertake this amongst other competing priorities.

“Mostly all of that stuff was covered in doing the outcomes reports was that opportunity to reflect on that and get all of that sort of information to then change some of those approaches moving forward. And I think it really kind of fell to the caseworkers involved, with, like, ongoing involvement with the young people to give them that opportunity to reflect and support them after the trips had occurred as well.” VACCA staff interview

This is also reflected in the analysis of the Reunion Reports. Although the majority of the reports do contain information, there is not a lot of detail within the response sections. Respondents usually wrote one to two sentences, which does not allow for detailed analysis or understanding of any of the potential outcomes.

Staff are skilled at reflective practice, but there is a lack of upwards aggregation of results and outcomes

Caseworkers also provided feedback that the process of undertaking reflective practice was ad-hoc, and could provide useful insights with stronger mechanisms for analysis in place at different levels. This could be through linking together the data collected in Reunion Reports or any other structured reflective practice into a broader evaluation framework, which produced reports or identified trends within the RTC program.

Caseworkers also identified that there are barriers to effective reflective practice, especially in situations where the RTC has been a challenging experience for participants or family members. Feedback was received that the children who are participating in the trip may be reluctant to speak about negative aspects of their experience, which can mean that opportunities to improve outcomes can be missed.

“If there’s been elements of the trip that haven’t gone well, then the young people aren’t necessarily very interested in talking about it, and it’s hard to get that information that if things have gone wrong they don’t really want to revisit that.” VACCA staff interview

This is further explored in section 5.2: Tools and approaches for collecting outcomes.

5.2 Tools and approaches for collecting outcomes

Alternative approaches to collecting outcomes and learning

Due to the complex logistics of delivering the RTC program, and the associated high busyness of staff, there is the potential for VACCA to explore alternative methods to collect data. This section explores some approaches that could be used to better collect outcomes, discuss learning and improve program delivery.

One simple way to improve outcomes collection would be to ensure that the Reunion Report Form was completed as part of a structured debrief between a staff member and a manager (or a member of the VACCA evaluation team) to talk through how everything went, and take notes about outcomes and learnings during the discussion. This would ensure that more time was dedicated to the process, and that more complex findings and outcomes could be discussed and drawn out.

Additionally, the RTC program presents opportunities for VACCA to utilise approaches such as case studies or significant change stories about the trips. These would provide opportunities to include the perspectives of different people who were involved in RTC trips each year, including families, staff and the children and young people. While these may be resource intensive, it might be possible to complete a few of these per year, especially with assistance from evaluation staff. These could also include a follow up component which would support capturing longer term outcomes.

Within the First Nations context, it may be more appropriate to adopt more narrative models of data collection, to complement the Reunion Forms. This may include opportunities to use non-written forms of data collection. For example, the RTC program could consider gathering short audio or video recordings of young people in conversation with VACCA staff members. This could potentially be a more accessible way to ensure that young peoples’ voices are reflected and captured.

Medium-term outcomes are collected by existing tools, but longer-term outcomes and impact require different approaches

RTC trips were highlighted as being one of the first steps in a long process of building connection, identity and belonging for children participating. While the process of evaluation using the Reunion Report Form is useful in collecting initial summative information about the outcomes for the child, there are no methods for capturing longer term changes or outcomes for the children participating in RTCs.

“There was quite a lot of outcomes reports that I was involved with the trips that I hadn’t planned. They were ones that had been done previously, and the outcomes reports hadn’t been done, so we then went back and got those. So some of those trips, it had been quite a few months since the trips had occurred, so sitting and then going through those outcome reports

and asking those questions became different, because you were getting a longer-term result from it. You weren't getting the, "Oh, it's only been a couple of weeks. This is where we're at." You were getting quite a few months. So it was really going through those outcome reports, going through those questions, and gathering that information. Sitting with them, not just going on reports of what you heard, but being able to ask for that information and then clarify it as much as possible." VACCA staff interview

Given the focus of RTC on the longer-term importance of building connection to culture, Aboriginal identity and links to Country, capturing and understanding these long-term outcomes, impacts and learnings is important for future iterations of the program. This could be achieved through verbal or documentary check-ins with the participant 12 months after the completion of their RTC.

Participant outcomes are being captured, but there is a missing element of the voice of families on Country

While current Reunion Report Forms provide space to capture outcomes and voices of caseworkers and young people, one aspect that is missing is the outcomes for family on Country. Feedback was received that outcomes measurement could be improved through the systematic recording of perspectives of families who were involved in RTCs. This could occur through a phone interview with questions linked to an overall evaluation framework based on the program logic for RTC.

"... there's a lot of importance placed on the young person's voice that went on the trip, and getting what their experience was from the trip, but I think the other element is the people that they've met on the trip ... because they're an important part of that trip as well. You're developing a connection and a relationship with not just the young person, but an extended family or people. So hearing what their feelings were about the trip and how it went, and how they feel that things could have been different for them as well, that voice probably hasn't been captured. But I think that's an important part of, if it was to continue, understanding from their side of things as well so that it's a positive experience all around." VACCA staff interview

The voice of families on Country who were involved in RTCs would also provide very useful information on how to better deliver future trips, including logistical and cultural knowledge.

A potential barrier for collecting this information and data is the cultural ownership of information by the Communities which VACCA partners with. Interviewees highlighted that any methodologies for collecting this kind of data should respect and protect the healing journey of the individual and the family.

Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form

Interviewees highlighted that the Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form were logistical in nature, and did not necessarily provide adequate space for capturing outcomes. This was further confirmed during analysis of these forms by Lirata staff as part of this evaluation. The following outlines some of the findings in relation to the existing methods to capture learnings from the RTC process.

Overall, the current Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form provide a robust way of capturing logistical details related to the RTC trips. These include information around destinations and age of the participants. The capturing of this information could be aggregated to provide useful learnings for the RTC program and VACCA (there is further discussion of this below). This could support both the successful delivery of RTCs and more effective outcomes measurement.

Additionally, the Reunion Proposals do not outline agreed outcomes of the trip, but focus on logistical aspects throughout. The Reunion Proposal Form mentions a strengths, aspirations and concerns checklist. This document exists but was not completed as part of any of the Reunion Proposals which were reviewed as part of this evaluation. This checklist would be a useful starting point for capturing and agreeing outcomes, and should be used for any future trips.

Developing and recording agreed objectives and outcomes during the planning stage of RTCs would enable stakeholders to consider after trips had been completed whether these outcomes had been achieved, or what further steps might be helpful in working toward them.

The evaluation also revealed that there needs to be further clarity about the overall responsibilities relating to data collection and analysis of the RTC program, both broadly, and relating to the Gandel Foundation trips which were reviewed as part of this evaluation. The RED team within VACCA can support the development of a MEL framework or other supports, but someone within the RTC program needs to have responsibility for ensuring that this is implemented.

The Reunion Report Form collects useful information for the measurement of outcomes and for reflection and improvement of the RTC program. However, it is also missing some more systematic collection of data which could be linked to the Reunion Proposal Form. Outcomes information is collected through the question “Was the reunion ‘successful’ and how do you know?” Although this allows for VACCA staff to capture information, the question does not break down what successful means, or link to any agreed outcomes. In addition to this, the recommendations section does not require a breakdown of who the recommendations are for. Both these sections could have further guided questions and present opportunities for further analysis.

Scope for a broader Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework

Information captured in these documents could be aggregated up into a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework. This would allow for the capture of outcomes, impact and learning at a program level. This evaluation has created a framework which could be further expanded upon by the RTC program in order to systematically capture some of the complex outcome and learnings that are occurring within the program, and enable stronger programming.

VACCA may decide to further develop their processes for reflection and learning, including updating the Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form, encouraging more reflective practice between staff and managers and starting to capture information from new groups (such as family on Country). If this happens, then a structured MEL framework would be an excellent tool for capturing and understanding the data, and lead to improvements in outcomes for VACCA and all beneficiaries. It could also guide and adapt data collection.

5.3 Recommendations

Recommendations for VACCA

- 8. Explore the possibility of developing a formal reflective practice process for staff as part of the RTC model. This could include the development of a guide and templates to support more structured debrief and reflection on RTC trips.**

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- 9. Develop methods to gather information about the outcomes that may occur for families and Communities living on Country as a result of the RTCs, for example through phone interview, case studies, or audio and video recordings.**
 - 10. Explore other methods through which narrative information about RTC outcomes could be gathered, including methods through which the voices of young people could be heard directly, such as audio and video recordings, significant change stories and case studies.**
 - 11. Revise the Reunion Proposal and Reunion Report Forms to better support outcome measurement and learning:**
 - a. Document agreed outcomes and objectives for each RTC process**
 - b. Additional guidance on assessing the success of reunions and on recommendations.**
 - 12. Clarify the overall responsibilities for the collection and oversight of data collection relating to the RTC program.**
 - 13. Consider the development of a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework for the RTC program, supported by the Research and Evidence Development (RED) Team, which will enable VACCA to aggregate outcomes, impact and learning at a program level, supported by the RED team.**

6 CONCLUSION

The chapter provides a brief conclusion, and answers the key evaluation questions that shaped the evaluation.

6.1 Responses to key evaluation questions

1. What is the program logic underpinning the model?

The program logic for the RTC program was developed by VACCA as part the evaluation process. It was developed through a participatory process involving VACCA staff who had taken part in the process of planning and delivering RTC trips. Key elements of the logic include:

- **Activities** including participant identification, planning, engagement of children/young people, engagement of family members, and conducting of RTC visits
- **Short-term outcomes** including children/young people participating in the process, exploring and participating in a range of cultural connections
- **Medium-term outcomes** including children/young people enjoying visits, experiencing cultural connectedness, having increased knowledge of their culture, developing stronger networks, and having a stronger sense of identity as an Aboriginal person
- **Long-term outcomes** including children/young people having increased connection with family, Community and Country, increased knowledge of culture, growing sense of pride and ability to draw on their culture for strength.

The evaluation demonstrates that the logic underpinning the program is sound. The activities undertaken by staff as part of the program have effectively contributed to achievement of all medium-term outcomes identified within the program logic, and are likely contributing to the intended long-term outcomes

The evaluation identified a number of ways in which the program logic can be updated and improved. These include ensuring that outcomes for families on Country are reflected in the medium and long-term outcomes section of the logic, and potentially including outcomes for staff as a result of participating in RTCs.

2. What have been the achievements and challenges of delivering the RTC program over the past three years?

There have been a number of achievements during the process of delivering the Gandel Foundation funded RTC trips, as well as some significant challenges. These are briefly summarised below.

Achievements

The program successfully delivered nine RTC trips across Victoria and interstate to a number of different cultural groups and locations.

The program drew on and built the extensive logistical and cultural knowledge of VACCA staff and caseworkers to successfully overcome complex planning and logistics challenges relating to participant, family and cultural dynamics to organise and deliver these RTCs

The trips were meaningful, safe and led to an increase in a sense of Aboriginal identity, connection to Country, and relationships with family for the participants. Non-Aboriginal staff also gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by Aboriginal staff at VACCA, which was an unexpected outcome.

The program identified that the RTC process is just one step in a broader journey of connection to Country, identity and culture, and that the process needs to continue. VACCA staff encouraged participants to sustain connections through a variety of means, and it is likely that the program has contributed to long term outcomes for participants.

Challenges

A key challenge for the program was the COVID-19 pandemic which curtailed the majority of trips planned as part of the funding stream. This meant that only nine trips were possible out of planned 25.

During the planning and delivery phase of RTCs, there were a number of challenges which VACCA staff worked hard to overcome. Specifically, organising RTC trips when there was no established communication lines or relationships with the family on Country was challenging for staff, and required extensive lead-in time as part of that work.

Collecting outcomes data and understanding the results of the program was also a challenge. This was due to the complexity of the processes that RTC supports, including dealing with participants who may be experiencing trauma. It was also related to the staff capacity to effectively undertake reflective practice, in conjunction with the participants. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss some of the key challenges and achievements of the RTC program.

3. How can the program better measure its emergent benefits and outcomes?

The RTC program has produced a number of substantial and significant results and outcomes for its participants. However, there are several approaches identified as part of this evaluation that could support better measurement of outcomes, and a stronger learning culture.

There are opportunities to adopt a more narrative approach to capturing information through utilising case studies, significant change stories, and encouraging more structured reflection. Additionally, the Reunion Proposal Form and Reunion Report Form could be further strengthened to ensure that they are fit for purpose, and can capture, aggregate and understand outcomes and learnings.

The RTC program could also use this evaluation, and the accompanying framework, to develop a MEL Framework which covers the whole program, regardless of funding stream. This would enable VACCA to better understand learnings, adapt the program as necessary, and communicate any key findings, outcomes and impacts.

4. How well and to what extent does the program achieve its intended outcomes?

The evaluation demonstrates that the program is strongly achieving its medium-term outcomes for children and young people, and is also creating outcomes for groups of beneficiaries not identified within the program logic, including VACCA staff and families on Country. The medium-term outcomes, and achievements relating to each, are listed briefly below.

Children/Young People have enjoyed their visits and have a meaningful narrative for themselves

The evaluation found that children and young people who took part in the Gandel Foundation funded RTCs had an enjoyable experience, due to an increased sense of identity, connection to Country, and ability to undertake cultural activities related to their identity.

Children/Young People experience cultural connectedness in a safe and supported environment

The evaluation found that all participants were safe throughout the process of delivering RTC trips, and were supported to experience cultural connectedness in an appropriate and context-specific manner.

Children/Young People and Carers have increased knowledge of their culture

Participants in RTCs funded by Gandel Foundation increased their knowledge of their culture, familial ties, language and practice. In addition to this, VACCA staff also experienced a stronger understanding of the different Aboriginal cultures that the program works with.

Children/Young People have opportunities to develop stronger support networks

Children and young people built stronger support networks with their family on Country, and on some occasions, there were reported outcomes of participants building their connections with people who were not on RTC trips, but with whom they shared a similar cultural background. Participants were able to strengthen friendship groups with others because of their shared identity.

Children/Young People have a strengthened sense of cultural connection and identity as an Aboriginal person

A key outcome for the program was the increased sense of cultural connection and identity experienced by the participants. The evaluation revealed that the strength of the reunions could be emotionally overwhelming for staff who accompanied the participants, and also contributed to healing processes for a number of the participants.

It is likely that the RTC program contributes substantially to the long-term outcomes and impacts identified within the program logic, however this evaluation cannot demonstrate that due to data limitations. See Chapter 4 for more information about outcomes.

5. In what ways do staff feel the program could be improved?

Staff identified a number of ways in which the program could be improved, in areas including the selection of participants, planning, delivery and follow up on RTC trips. Specifically, staff suggested ensuring there was more lead-in time for potentially complex RTC trips, in order to undertake proper consultation with Communities on Country. Where possible this should be undertaken by staff with strong connections to Country. Staff highlighted that to effectively deliver RTCs, a team approach, with staff who have different capacities across logistics, cultural connection and evaluation would lead to strong results.

Finally, staff highlighted the need to improve methods of collecting outcomes data from families on Country, as well as ensuring that they have the necessary support at the conclusion of RTC programs. This was highlighted as a gap within the current program logic and planning approach.

See chapter 5 for more information on improvements to the RTC program.

6.2 Overall conclusion

The RTC program sets out to address important needs for young Aboriginal people, in an environment in which both the young people and their extended families have often experienced a great deal of trauma. VACCA has developed a strong set of planning and risk management processes to support the RTC visits and these have been skilfully implemented by staff to make the visits a positive experience for those involved.

The RTC program has faced significant delays throughout the period covered by this evaluation. The COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns has meant that the program has effectively been on hold over the past two years. Despite this, the RTCs which were included as part of this evaluation demonstrate the effectiveness of the program in building connections, relationships and identity for Aboriginal participants and staff. The robust selection, planning and follow up processes developed by the program places it in good stead to continue to deliver strong outcomes and impacts in the future.

VACCA staff have demonstrated high levels of capacity, passion and knowledge to effectively deliver 9 trips which have been able to be implemented and evaluated as part of the Gandel Foundation funding. Despite the evaluation not having the opportunity to speak to RTC participants, it is clear that the program itself has ongoing effects for the lives of Aboriginal people who are involved.

The evaluation has found emerging evidence of strong positive outcomes for participants, as well as for extended family members and VACCA staff. The evaluation demonstrated that the Gandel Foundation funded RTC trips led to the achievement of the medium level outcomes which were planned in the program logic. Children and young people had enjoyable and meaningful RTCs, which led to an increase in their sense of Aboriginal identity, connection to culture and Country, stronger support networks and understanding of their own Aboriginal narrative.

Interviews with VACCA staff who had seen firsthand the results of the RTC program, combined with stories from the Reunion Report Forms show the strength, importance and impact of the RTC process on the participants. Although RTCs were described as a very emotional and sometimes overwhelming experience, they are also a crucial step in a healing process as children and young people connect more deeply with Aboriginal identity, family, culture and Country.

The robust selection, planning and follow up processes developed by the RTC program place it in good stead to continue to deliver strong outcomes and impacts in the future. VACCA is strongly encouraged to continue implementing this program and to further develop the model and data collection processes that support it.

