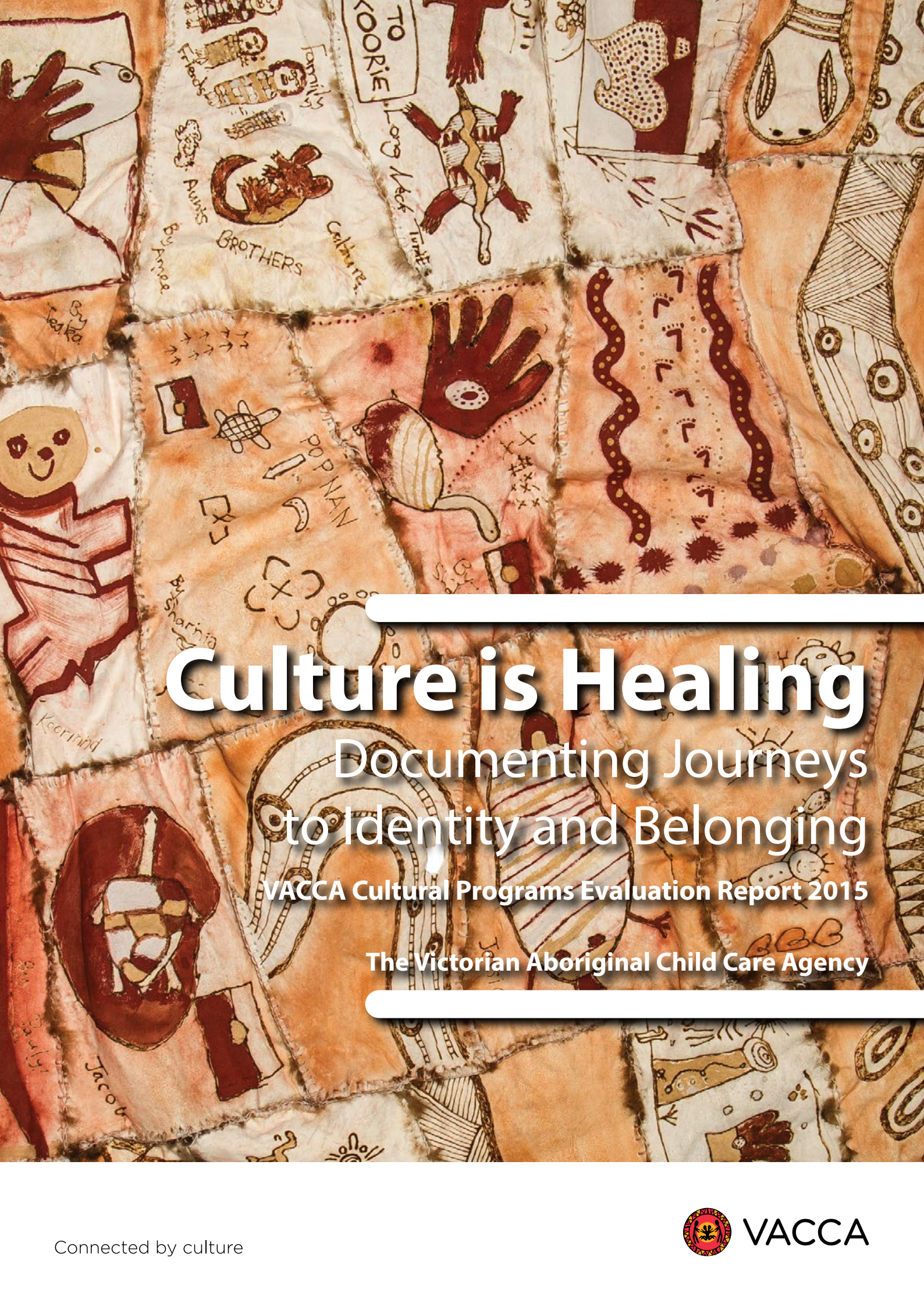




Culture is Healing

Documenting Journeys to Identity and Belonging

VACCA Cultural Programs Evaluation Report 2015

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency



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"All of us know how important it is to tell our children stories. Telling stories helps children learn. More importantly, telling our children the true stories of our families and our peoples helps form their identity. Our past, our personal stories, make us who we are. So too do stories of peoples. Our stories are the source of our resilience. My story, my Aboriginal cultural story, is central to who I am and is a chapter of one of the longest continuing stories in the world. For millennia Koorie learning was part of the nurture and care provided to children and young people by each distinct Koorie community throughout what we now call Victoria. The stories of the creator spirits, discerned by the Elders and passed down by the extended family and community, ensured that knowledge about language, law, ethics, politics, trade, economics and ecology was all communicated to each young person according to their stage of life. Education was holistic and grounded in the land and waters.

Our Aboriginal stories, of the Lore and of our resistance leaders, continue to surround our children today. They live in our children, make them strong and help them learn about the world. We need to tell our stories so our children inherit them as precious gifts from the past. The Aboriginal children of today need to be trusted to share these stories of the past with the Aboriginal children of the future. We need to learn from our old and new stories if we are to meet the challenges of the present and create a better future. It's a story of all of us. Make it your story."

Muriel Bamblett, CEO, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

¹ Bamblett, M. (2008). 'Stand Strong Stand Proud', Keynote address, VACCA Conference: Melbourne.

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Executive Summary



At VACCA we know and have witnessed that culture is healing; it builds resilience; and is without doubt a protective factor for Aboriginal children in out of home care and in the broader community. This evaluation report aims to highlight the importance of culture in the healing journey of Aboriginal children and families and give voice to those who feel the impact and change the most.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) ran the Narrative Evaluation Action Research (NEAR) pilot in part of capacity building for staff and in part as a way to gather evidence to tell stories of the work that we do through the voices of the people directly involved – the children, the Elders, the families, the artists and the VACCA workers. The challenge was finding the time in busy work schedules to come together every fortnight and bring together the evidence and information we collected and start writing our stories. The highlight was definitely the support we all gave each other along the way and the pride each worker expressed and showed when they talked about the work they do and how meaningful it was to them. It was also very satisfying to create an evaluation report which spoke loudly and clearly from the Aboriginal community, and we hope highlights that culture is critical in the healing journey of the children and families we work with and needs to be embedded across our practice.

The pilot helped show us that we already gather a lot of evidence on the programs that we run, but often it does not get shared beyond a small group of people. Meeting fortnightly and following a specific methodology, as we gathered and collated stories and information for our final narratives, helped us learn to reflect and consider our practice in a systematic way and recognise the importance of gathering different types of evidence to be able to paint a full picture of a program.

Strong Bangerang woman, Alli-Jade Briggs, a member of the project team commented:

"What I loved about taking part in the NEAR Evaluation project was the opportunity that it created to reflect on the work that we do. It made me think about each and every detail of that specific project and what each moment meant not only to me but to all involved in the project from the young people, to the Elders and even the school teachers. It also made me really look at all the work that we do and see that everything is tied together through so many factors such as culture, identity and connection. I thought that not having a strong background or experience in evaluation that I would struggle with the language used so that was a small challenge for me but I worked past it.

There are skills that I have taken with me out of doing the NEAR project. I am now more aware and conscious of different ways to document my thoughts, others' quotes and note significant moments. I now look at the evidence I have and determine what I think is missing. I didn't have these skills before the NEAR Project so I do personally feel that I have learnt so much."

Our findings highlighted commonalities across the different VACCA cultural programs and helped us identify key elements that make our programs strong, meaningful and effective for the young people and families that we engage with. Relationships are critical to the success of all that we do. Taking the time for the children and young people to get to know the Elders, artists and workers is critical for them to feel safe, build trust and take risks. The importance of relationships cannot be underestimated. Supporting the children's understanding of their identity and where they belong underpins what we do. We know that when a young person has a strong sense of self and knows their community and Aboriginal connections and family, their resilience grows. The passing on of cultural knowledge to support this is paramount. Putting the pieces together in a general historical context helps the young people situate their stories in the bigger story of colonisation and its impacts. Learning their own personal family stories helps develop understanding of their own background and the reasons why they are in child protection and this supports their journey of healing.

As Andrew Jackomos, Victoria's Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People stated:

"The value of culture, connection to family, community and to country is the essence of our survival as the first peoples of this nation. Two thirds (66/99) of the deaths in custody reviewed by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody were of Aboriginal people who had been removed from their families, communities and country.

We know the strongest resilience skills a young Aboriginal person can have in their growing up is to have knowledge and connection to their culture. What worries me most is the increasing numbers of Aboriginal children and young people in the Out of Home Care system whom for whatever reasons are losing these contacts and connections."

VACCA works hard to ensure the children in our care and the broader community stay connected or are reconnected to culture, learn about their families and have opportunities to take part in programs in which cultural practices are being revived and knowledge is being passed on. This report includes four narratives which highlight how our work connects children and young people to culture, family and community.

Each story has been documented by a key author with the voices of children, family, Elders and VACCA workers woven through to provide a broader and deeper understanding of how the programs impact and why they need to take place and be given the same standing as western therapeutic healing practice.

"We know the strongest resilience skills a young Aboriginal person can have in their growing up is to have knowledge and connection to their culture."

Andrew Jackomos, Victoria's Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People

Introduction

In 2011, while writing an evaluation report for VACCA's Closing the Health Gap funded activities, we were encouraged by Noeleen Tunney from the Department of Health to consider the Narrative Evaluation Action Research (NEAR) methodology to better showcase the work that we do and the outcomes it achieves. We were becoming aware that the program evaluation methodology that we had been using was not capturing the stories of the young people, staff, Elders and community members involved in our programs. In 2013, we engaged NEAR methodology to begin work on a pilot project mentoring a small project team of VACCA staff in action research evaluation methodology.

Narrative methods drawn from the arts and social sciences are used to provide practitioners with a framework for crafting 'good stories' about program practice. The stories move from the past to the future. They explore the value of a program by expressing what was or could be considered of value at the time of program development (prospective evaluation), what was found to be of value following implementation (retrospective evaluation) and what could subsequently be of value in the future (abductive evaluation). The stories highlight the diverse voices and experiences of those engaged with a program. Action research methods are used to capture these insights.

Narrative evaluation methods serve as an addition to the quantitative methods used to measure program impact and outcomes. The 'moral' of the story provides guidance for future quality practice and program improvement.

The project team met fortnightly over a six-month period learning about the NEAR methodology and continually reflecting on the programs as they were being implemented. This evaluation report is the outcome of the pilot. The report privileges the voices of the young people, their families, VACCA workers, Elders, community and artists, which we believe highlights the depth of engagement and value of Aboriginal culture within our practice. This report showcases four cultural programs, from across VACCA services. We hope that these accounts and our analysis will be valuable for VACCA as well as our funders and the Department of Health and Human Services. We are mindful that the work that we do involves vulnerable children and young people and a key focus of the evaluation was to incorporate appropriate ways to work with them. We believe that exploring the impacts of these programs on the young people involved will help improve our practice as well as supporting our advocacy and contributing to research demonstrating the need for embedding culture across the child and family welfare, health and education sectors for all Aboriginal children.

With nearly 40 years of experience, our organisation and our staff understand what it means for Aboriginal children and young people to feel safe and to realise their cultural identity. Strong family connections are so vital for the wellbeing of the Aboriginal community in Victoria. This is what we are constantly trying to build into our daily practice, with competing demands and having to find funding to fulfill the need to connect children

and families to their cultural heritage and community. We advocate strongly for culture to be embedded in practice, across all sectors.

Historically, Aboriginal children and families have been the objects of study and research, the statistics on the page and voiceless in reporting. It is important therefore to adopt methodologies in research that give space for those voices to lead and to tell their stories. This is why VACCA undertook this method of evaluation. Our analysis sits within the narratives of the participants. The reflections of those involved highlight the level of effectiveness of the programs as well as identifying issues we could explore more deeply, and areas for improvement.

This approach is a move towards a different method of evaluation of our activities and programs. It values the work and the benefits that continue beyond the projects themselves; it values the relationships that are critical in building trust and respect between young people, Elders, community members and staff; and it values the voices of those involved. It hopefully reveals elements of our work and contributing factors where other methodologies would not.

In running our programs we draw on the strength of our relationships with Aboriginal young people, their families, schools, Elders, community organisations, community leaders and Aboriginal artists. We are continually building on our cultural work with children and young people, to support the strengthening of their identity and improve their self-confidence, pride and connection with the local Aboriginal community. As the narratives of the children indicate, this helps to build a sense of belonging.

The narrative approach fits well within the context of our work as storytelling plays an integral role in Aboriginal cultural practices. It is the way that knowledge has been passed down through generations for over 40,000 years. At VACCA we understand the importance of all Aboriginal children learning about their culture and heritage. We believe it builds resilience and a strong sense of identity. By being removed into care Aboriginal children and young people can have their ties to family, community and culture severed. VACCA has a responsibility to ensure that our work with Aboriginal children and families embeds Aboriginal culture but we also acknowledge that more must be done. Our practice and management alone cannot address the level of disconnection from culture that so many children and families experience. The opportunity to learn cultural practices from Elders and community members in a culturally safe space is critical through cultural programs like Connection to Sea Country, the Koorie Tiddas and Return to Country.

The narrative approach to evaluation is in keeping with Aboriginal cultural practice and in line with VACCA's vision that, *"Our children, young people, families and communities are thriving, culturally strong, empowered and safe."* This has also been identified in the Maori context in New Zealand; *"Culturally, storytelling is one way family and tribal information is passed on from one generation to the next and is recognised as a culturally-appropriate approach for gathering qualitative information."*²

The following section outlines the work of VACCA and the complexities and issues we need to consider in our practice.

² Wong, M. & Boyes, R., "Ebb and flow" to shape a better future: Using story-telling to evaluate in Maori settings." Education Review, Office NZ Government, p 1.



VACCA's Work



Spending time with Elders, artists and community members helps young people understand who they are, and helps their cultural connections develop.

The rights set out in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the Victorian Charter for children in out of home care need to be at the forefront of our practice.

For Aboriginal children in out of home care, their basic human rights, of developing a strong Aboriginal identity and having a right to learn and practice their culture has been compromised. This disadvantage is something that drives VACCA, because we know culture to be a protective factor. Upholding Indigenous people's rights is key to healing Aboriginal children and families who have experienced neglect, separation and cultural disconnection. We are keenly aware that VACCA is directly and contractually responsible for fewer than 200 out of approximately 1300 Aboriginal children in care across Victoria. The majority of Aboriginal children in care are the responsibility of government and of other, mainly non-Aboriginal agencies, and the majority are living with non-Aboriginal families, spread across the State of Victoria. Our approach therefore is also open, in that we hope to attract carers and their children who may not normally have direct contact with VACCA, in order to give them opportunities to take part in our cultural programs where possible. Spending time with Elders, Aboriginal artists and community members helps young people understand who they are, and helps their cultural connections develop. Research has also shown that programs that increase young people's involvement in sport, arts, or community group activities may reduce the likelihood of Indigenous young people having repeated contact with police³.

We are committed to protecting, promoting, reviving and celebrating Aboriginal culture, knowing this is integral to the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of our people.

VACCA receives almost 95% of its funding from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (Victorian Government) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) (Federal Government). Cultural work is not part of VACCA's core funding received from DHHS or DSS. Cultural programs and other innovations are usually funded through philanthropic and government grants. We believe cultural programs are a critical part of the support and care that VACCA provides for Aboriginal children and young people in their journey of healing. We argue that the models of funding used for client services does not adequately cover what is essential to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in care or who are at risk.

There is a need for a culturally informed, community led evaluation framework, to highlight the strengths as well as the issues we face in running these programs which provide opportunities for cultural strengthening, resilience and healing.

Our vision is a community that is strong in culture, values their children and young people and recognises the importance of the whole community in raising children and keeping families together. We advocate strongly for the right of Aboriginal children to be raised in their own culture and of the importance and value of family, extended family, kinship networks, culture and community in raising or 'growing up' Aboriginal children. Throughout all of this an emphasis is placed on culture as a protective

"Our purpose is to strengthen the safety, wellbeing and cultural connectedness of Aboriginal children, individuals and families in their community."

Muriel Bamblett, CEO, VACCA

factor. VACCA's CEO, Muriel Bamblett states that, *"Culture and connection to culture remains a strong underlying principle for all our work. Our purpose is to strengthen the safety, wellbeing and cultural connectedness of Aboriginal children, individuals and families in their community."*⁴ We offer a growing range of culturally relevant services that are responsive to the diverse needs of our community and based upon holistic, strengths-based and trauma-informed models of practice and care.

Our communities are made up of complex family and kinship networks. In all Aboriginal communities, nurture and care is the responsibility not just of parents but of the extended family. Raising children is shared by the extended family and guided by the wisdom and experience of Elders. Elders play a critical role in education and the maintenance of culture.

We know that varied and diverse therapeutic approaches, from both Western and Aboriginal practices, provide a holistic framework to address both individual and collective trauma. Jiman and Bundjalung woman, trauma specialist Professor Judy Atkinson's argument for a culturally informed therapeutic model would also be beneficial in a community setting where through the *"creation of safe places for sharing where the unspeakable can be given voice, where feelings can be felt, and where sense can be made out of*

*what seemed previously senseless."*⁵

A collective healing model, where children, young people, community members, families and Elders come together in culturally safe spaces would better support Aboriginal communities deal with collective trauma.

The importance of cultural connections is outlined in VACCA's annual reports; *"Maintaining children's cultural connections and ensuring a strong cultural identity underpins all aspects of our work. Cultural identity is seen to be as equally important as providing a safe, stable and healing environment."*⁶ While VACCA acknowledges the challenges faced by the Aboriginal community, we also acknowledge their strengths. We draw on these strengths and importance of culture to protect, empower and deliver services to heal children and families.

³ Cameron and MacDougall 2000; Mason and Wilson 1988; Morris, Sallybanks and Willis 2003; Randell 2002, cited in Productivity Commission Report OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE 2007 pp 34-34. [Location, Australian Productivity Commission] From WR 2009 – what does WR stand for?

⁴ Muriel Bamblett, 'CEO's Message', Annual Report 2011/2012 'Connected by Culture', VACCA, Melbourne [2011-2012] p13

⁵ Atkinson, Judy, "Trauma Trails, Recreating Songlines – The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia" Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2002 p37

⁶ VACCA, 'Out of Home Care' in Annual Report 2011/2012 'Connected by Culture' VACCA, Melbourne, 2012 p39

Principles of Practice for VACCAs Cultural Programs

We approach the planning, development and implementation of our programs with the following principles of practice in mind.

Our experience of working with vulnerable children has taught us that planning and managing risks are very important in ensuring successful outcomes. This planning includes having adequate support on hand and having staff involved who are trained in working with children who have experienced trauma.

Children in out of home care can be dealing with a multitude of issues at any one time: children often enter care having been exposed to high levels of abuse and neglect; foster care placement may have broken down; counselling could have brought forth horrific memories; they could have had a bad experience in access with their family, and all these scenarios can impact on their behaviours in the workshops.

To minimise risks, we keep in regular contact with case workers, for updates on the young people's situation. We also have a high ratio of adults to children, so that if a staff member needs to go off site with a child, we are not left short of support, and the children's needs are met. We keep workshop numbers purposefully low, so that the young people are not over stimulated, and that all staff have enough time to develop relationships with the children.

We give consideration to the choice of spaces where we hold workshops to ensure that they are culturally safe, that they are not too big and have a feeling of intimacy for the group. Considerations around space also need to include exits that can be easily monitored to ensure the safety of the young people involved.

Our work is guided by Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and we work in collaboration with community members on all projects.

For each of the cultural programs a risk management plan is developed. For those young people who we know are going through a particularly hard time, we will develop a personal risk management plan so that if things do get out of hand, we have back up support, as well as ensuring that they are included in the best and most productive way for the group as a whole. If we know a young person would struggle to come on a weekly basis or take part in a whole program we can work out a modified program, so they do not feel excluded.

At VACCA we know that the reality of a high turnover of staff and placement breakdowns impacts on the young person's ability to develop relationships and trust, and to feel a sense of stability and belonging. Within our programs we aim to work with the same Elders, artists and musicians so that the young people can build relationships over time. The Elders, artists and musicians bring skills and knowledge to facilitate healing. The composition of the cultural programs team have been consistent for a number of years and this has helped to build good relationships between the staff and the young people involved.

In spite of taking all this into consideration, it does not mean everything runs smoothly. There are many challenges in bringing vulnerable and at risk children together in groups. The background work and planning that is not showcased within the narratives in this report, is however a key factor to the success of these programs.

Our work is guided by Aboriginal people's right to self-determination included in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and as a principle in Victorian legislation (Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005) and we work in collaboration with community members on all projects. In being guided by the following principles, we create programs that support the needs of children and young people so they can be engaged more effectively in learning about and expressing their identity. It has been our experience that children and young people are more likely to feel connected and proud in their identity when they feel safe, supported, inspired, and have a sense of belonging.

Cultural Safety

We endeavour to create culturally safe spaces, where young people feel their culture is valued, respected and celebrated. Our aim is that community and Elders will also feel welcomed and supported in sharing their knowledge. As one of our workers reflected, cultural safety means *"Feeling safe in the knowledge that you're listened to, that your contribution to the community is important, just as much as anyone else's."*⁷

Culture as a protective factor

We see culture as a protective factor for our children and young people in care. Fostering a child's cultural identity is critical for the overall wellbeing of the child. A Koorie worker reflects on the importance of this: *"Feeling safe in who you are... in your identity. Knowing that you're a proud Indigenous person... taking strength in your culture through adversities."* We wish to instil all our children and young people with knowledge of their culture and help them become strong in their identity.

Holistic approach

Through its suite of services, VACCA endeavours to provide a holistic framework of support for Aboriginal families living in Victoria. Children in out of home care are supported through case management as well as being linked in with a variety of cultural programs, festivals and access to community events. It is the layers of support that VACCA provides, across programs that helps build the resilience and cultural identity of our young people.

Trauma and healing

We understand trauma in the following way: *"Chronic abuse and/or neglect in childhood affect the mind, the developing brain, the body, spirit and relationships with others. The attachment difficulties associated with this and subsequent trauma interfere with the child's ability to regulate emotions and reactions. Among other things, such affect dysregulation lead to problems with controlling anger and impulses, and maintaining attention and connection."*⁸

With many of the young people that we work with, particularly children in out of home care, we need to understand the impact of trauma and then build this into our practice in responding to the children's needs. Knowing strategies to help regulate a young person's behaviour when they are heightened helps to avert or manage major incidents within a workshop. Though we may not know the triggers for each child, through appropriate staff training, we have strategies to help minimise the risks. This work is reinforced by VACCA's proven capacity to engage children and is strengthened by the relationships the children have with the VACCA workers.

Voice

Aboriginal children and young people's voices need to be heard and children need to be engaged in the process of finding meaning and sense of belonging to their lives. Listening to the voices of the children and young people allows for relevant content to be delivered in programs and increases their participation within the community. Young people need to be involved in the telling of these stories as part of their healing. The child centred approach to the planning and running of our programs allows this to happen.

⁷ Frankland, R., Bamblett, M., Lewis, P. and Trotter, R. This is Forever Business: A Framework for maintaining and restoring cultural safety in Aboriginal Victoria, VACCA, Melbourne, 2010 p63

⁸ Downey, L. "Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children" Take Two, Berry Street, Melbourne, 2007 p. 3



Aims

The following aims were developed to reflect what we hoped to get out of piloting the NEAR methodology as an approach to evaluating our cultural programs.

The NEAR framework was sought to support us to bring together a body of evidence which highlights the importance of having culture built into practice and service delivery for Aboriginal children and young people.

This is because at VACCA, children and young people's access to community, cultural practices, country and family are understood as a right for all Aboriginal children and should be included as part of their daily lives.

At VACCA we are committed to providing programs and services in a culturally strengthening and supportive way. This evaluation method has been developed in such a way that it can provide spaces where we can hear the voices of all those who have been involved in a program, and so helps give voice to children, families, VACCA staff, Elders and community members.

There are five main aims of this evaluation process:

1. To evaluate the model of practice used in cultural programs;
2. To have this model of evaluative practice built into practice for VACCA staff;
3. That by using this model it creates a space to reflect and improve on practice;
4. That by using this model we help support children and young people and community members have a voice;
5. That by using this model it supports staff to see that their work is valued and important.

We used these aims to help evaluate the evaluation process itself and reflect on this in the Summation.



Ethics



In each of the projects outlined in this report we evaluate the ways in which we are able to achieve good practice, as well as potential growth areas. This will help inform and improve future projects. Each program is different so we established different guiding principles to ensure that we protect the young people and families involved as well as being able to showcase the significant work that has been accomplished.

We created consent forms (See Appendix 1) for all participants (young people, Elders, artists and community members) to sign if happy to have their stories and photos included in the narratives. We have only included what people were happy to share, and they have been invited to provide feedback at various stages of this process. Informed consent can only be possible when there is adequate time and space provided to share and inform participants about how their stories and photos will be used.



The history of the children's lives has not been explored in depth in any of the narratives. This has not been an exercise to focus on their trauma but rather a process to explore what benefits Aboriginal children and young people gain from programs, and the ways in which the programs support them to be connected and strong and proud in their identity.

We have made a considered and conscious decision to use the young people's names in these narratives. This decision moves away from the more familiar research approach where de-identifying someone is a means of safety and protection. We believe that giving space for these young people to share their stories gives voice and is an empowering statement of action research. We are aware that the Victorian Aboriginal community is small, and that the young people involved may be able to be identified by their first name, and we believe that these stories are those of strength in identity, belonging and cultural practice. They are the stories that these young people want to share. The cultural context of this work puts up some challenges for VACCA as an organisation when it comes to research and evaluation. How do we challenge the Western model of research which can disenfranchise 'the subjects' of the research or evaluation, and instead put forward a model which empowers Aboriginal young people to have a voice, in a culturally appropriate and culturally safe way?

Narrative Evaluation Stories

"I think the children are often on a journey and what they know about Aboriginal culture is quite often what they learn out of a book or what they see. A lot of our Aboriginal children aren't exposed to strong culture in their family so this is an opportunity to learn. Aboriginal culture is complicated but having Elders explain it in a way that they have done for years and centuries in a language and in storytelling and in pictures and in music means that children learn their culture in a way that isn't text book and isn't based on learning for a particular point in time and then never using that information. So information they learn through these programs will stay with them for the rest of their lives." Muriel Bamblett, CEO, VACCA.

Our claim is that programs that are culturally embedded are more likely to build on the resilience that a strong sense of cultural identity provides and will enable better outcomes for Aboriginal young people. As a young Aboriginal boy who was part of the Connecting to Sea Country project explains: *"I am proud to be Aboriginal and a Yorta Yorta boy! I learnt not to be shy, shame in front of people and to be free on my land."*

We hope that this report and the stories within it, advocate strongly on behalf of those most vulnerable Aboriginal children and that their access to their rights to knowing their culture and heritage will strengthen their resilience and help build strong and proud identities.

Randell highlights the effectiveness of using stories in evaluation: *"The use of stories as an evaluative tool is of most value when an organisation wishes to gain deeper insight into the effectiveness of a program or intervention. Although multiple perspectives are sought, each story provides an intimate and personal account that can make findings more memorable and more believable."*⁹ This wealth of information is often lost within a quantitative approach to evaluation and where there is a more prescriptive method of questioning such as surveys.

Across all the programs Aboriginal young people learn that they are the next generation of educators and that they will be passing on these stories to their children and their families. The impact of being part of this transmission of knowledge is felt by all involved. The Elders, young people and their families and carers as well as the workers all witness the pride and sense of belonging developing in these young people in knowing their culture and their history. For example one of the young people in the the Connecting to Sea Country project said: *"When Auntie Carolyn told the story, it made me feel good about myself. I learnt that if we don't pass on these stories, the knowledge will be lost forever."*

While the focus has been on the children and youth, the adults have also gained so much from being part of these workshops. The healing aspect of sharing and learning together, and from each other, is across and between generations. Although ostensibly we began working for the benefit of the children, we could see that all those around the children have also been benefitting and learning.

Below are four narratives about different Cultural Programs. Each has a back story, which provides the context, and a story which was written by a member of the VACCA NEAR team. Further detail (e.g. numbers involved, duration) is attached in the Appendix 2.

"When Auntie Carolyn told the story, it made me feel good about myself. I learnt that if we don't pass on these stories, the knowledge will be lost forever."

Courtney

⁹ Randell, (2013) as quoted in 'Ebb and flow' to shape a better future: Using story-telling to evaluate in Māori settings. Marge Wong & Raiha Boyes. Education Review Office, Aotearoa/NZ government. p.1

Aboriginal children in care are at great risk of losing contact with their family, community and culture. As the leading agency in Victoria providing Aboriginal child and family services, it is paramount that VACCA is at the forefront of cultural planning for Aboriginal children and leading the way in the sector. Completing detailed and meaningful cultural support plans, but most importantly implementing them and ensuring that they are living documents that are evolving with the age, stage and development of the child or young person is essential for supporting Aboriginal children in care.

We believe that Cultural Support Plans (CSPs), alongside an identified staff position for this work to be done, are critical for our work to be successful in supporting the child in their journey of connecting to country and community and culture. Through developing the CSP with the child or young person and their family there are agreed outcomes through a shared decision making process. It is also important, where appropriate, to continue to engage and involve the parents/guardian in the decision-making processes for their child.

Return to Country trips help children and young people build a sense of identity and belonging by re-establishing them to their family and community on their traditional lands. This idea came about as a logical extension of our aspirations to reunite children with their families. The relationships formed and the stories told in the process of returning to country help the children and young people know where they belong and where they come from.



The discussion and planning of the return to country for Ruby and Codey has been underway since April 2012, after the death of their mother. More formal planning began after successfully receiving a grant to fund three return to country trips.

Organising this trip not only involved organising travel and accommodation, but more importantly building a relationship and strong foundation with the family for the children. Ruby and Codey had not had much contact with their family in Queensland and their family had not seen them since they were infants. Building a relationship with the family and engaging Ruby and Codey in contact with their family via phone calls, emails, text messages and facebook was an important step in getting the ball rolling on the initial plans for the trip. Advice from Link-Up Victoria and

Link Up Queensland informed us that contact with the family was a crucial part of ensuring that the Return to Country would be successful.

There were a number of factors that we needed to take into account, such as cultural protocols. For example we needed to ask for permission from the local council of Elders to step on to the lands of the Lama Lama and Wunta Wunta people. Over a period of ten months we worked to engage Ruby and Codey with their family.

Consultation took place with Regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Link-up Queensland and Victoria, Wuchopperen Child Services (Cairns), Recognised Entity in Lockhart River and Coen, Local Traditional Owners Council and Elders Council and family members.

Return to Country

"I think this is important for my brother and me because we grew up not really knowing about our culture. So to finally get to know about culture and see our family tree and where we're from is really good."

Ruby

The main author in the Return to Country narrative is Kalimna Jackomos (Aboriginal Cultural Care Officer, VACCA). Kalimna was the organiser and driver of this project and it is through her voice that the story is told. The other voices in the story are Ruby and Codey (who are in Extended Care placements with VACCA), Yolanda Finette (Program Manager Recruitment, Permanent Care & Cultural Safety Community Care Program, VACCA), Violet Harrison (Program Manager, Eastern VACCA), Matthew Austin (Therapeutic Specialist, VACCA), Josie (maternal grandmother) and Wilma (Aunty).

"We let the family have time with the kids without Richard, Aunty Violet and myself being here ...

"Me and Aunty Violet were in the kitchen preparing for the BBQ, and through the louvers you could see the family and Ruby and Codey all sitting together and yarning and playing without being shame or needing us around.

"Me and Aunty Violet were yarning, saying that 'this is what it is all about', and that is exactly why this trip needed to happen for Ruby and Codey."
(Kalimna)

I have been working as a Cultural Care worker for the past year and a half, and at the start of this year I had the opportunity to work on the *Return to Country* Pilot Project. This project is about connecting children to their traditional countries, to their families both immediate and extended, to community and to culture.

The children we work with are all at different stages of their cultural journeys. It is essential that each individual journey is underpinned by research and development work. Yolanda explains: *"Cultural Support Plans are developed with the child and the child's family driving the process. Children and families are asked: 'What is important for you to know about your culture?'"*

As a result of the consultation process, the cultural support plans are meaningful because the child has a central role in defining what should happen. One of the most significant recommendations to emerge in the cultural support plans is to support the child's reconnection to their country and traditional lands. As a result, three Return to Country trips are planned during the pilot.

The first of the Return to Country trips was to take place in Queensland. Two siblings, Ruby and Codey, are living in out of home care in Melbourne, but their traditional country is Lama Lama and Wunta Wunta country in Cape York, Queensland. Through a Return to Country Ruby and Codey could create connections to their family, community, country and culture, and this could potentially be a catalyst to these strengthening throughout their lives. The opportunity to lead this project into fruition is one that is very exciting for me both personally and professionally. This would be the first project that I would manage from beginning to end, so it is a very significant step in my career. As a young Aboriginal woman it is also an amazing opportunity for my personal growth to go through this journey with Ruby and Codey.

In the lead up to the Return to Country, Ruby shares her thoughts around why this family reunification is so important:

"I think this is important for my brother and me because we grew up not really knowing about our culture. So to finally get to know about culture and see our family tree and where we're from is really good."

"And we're older now, we get to process that stuff more and I don't think we would have when we were younger so it's good we [get] to know it now."

"Because we never really had our parents around, or our Mum, so it's good to have something like the Support Plan to help us even if it's someone who wasn't really from there, didn't really know anything but it's good that they are helping out and getting us to understand our culture and heritage."

Auntie Wilma is the family matriarch of her generation. Auntie Wilma is instrumental in ensuring the Return to Country is developed and owned by the family. I have built a strong relationship with Wilma over the course of around ten months. I often call her and just talk about how the family is going, how the kids were looking forward to seeing them. The actual plan/ itinerary is developed with Wilma over the course of these conversations.

We arrive at the homestead in Coen and are just relaxing when Ruby stands up and sees a bunch of kids out the front. Ruby yells out "Oh My God KALIMNA!" "There are people out the front!" I tell Ruby and Codey to come outside with me because I know this is family. So I walk outside to greet the family and Ruby and Codey are right behind. As soon as Josie, their maternal grandmother, sees the kids she bursts into tears. They are tears of sadness from so much separation and tears of joy for finally being together.

Ruby and Codey have the chance to meet and develop relationships with both extended and immediate family, are introduced and met their community and spent time hunting and fishing on their traditional lands, learning language and hearing stories from their Elders.

VACCA Program Manager and Elder Violet Harrison, who had been asked to join the staff on the trip reflected:

"We were taken around the town to meet with family. Everyone was so welcoming but their joy in seeing the kids was priceless. Everyone was taking photos with the kids. Josie had not seen the kids since they were small, and was so proud, showing the kids to family. We were all tired but getting on well... I stand back and watch the kids interact with their family and I stay with [the] aunts and grandmother. I am so proud of the way they are handling themselves with family and they are beautifully adjusted young people."

For so long Ruby and Codey did not know anything about their people or their stories. Knowing you are Aboriginal and knowing your culture are two very different things. Those gaps were filled for Ruby and Codey on this trip. This is expressed by family. Their Auntie Wilma explains: "Their Mum has passed on. We need to teach them our ways. They need to know our language. Family makes you strong. We need each other". In relation to Ruby and Codey, their grandmother Josie reflects: "They need to hear our stories. They need to

know our language, know our people, our land and our ways. We will teach them our ways. They have our blood and they need to learn."

As an Aboriginal person I want the same things for children living in out of home care as I do the children in my own family. I see the experiences my nephew and nieces receive from having strong relationship with parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. To do this they need to hear stories of their people from their Aka (grandmother), and to understand customs and traditions first-hand from their A-the (Grandfather) and go through learning woman's business and men's business from their older cousins and siblings. Yolanda explains: "Aboriginal children deserve to know who they are and where they come from in order to know where they are going." "Culture and identity brings strength and resilience to Aboriginal children, and this becomes even more important for Aboriginal children in care." Violet remembers:

"I watch Ruby sitting with her grandmother, great aunty and see three generations of Kulla Kulla women sitting around a fire yarning. Priceless moment! A special moment has been when family sang to the kids 'welcome home' song in language. I was doing ok until the great aunty starts telling me the words, and that makes me cry. Older community members remember Ruby when she was small and you can see Ruby's mother when looking at her."

"A special moment has been when family sang to the kids 'welcome home' song in language. I was doing ok until the great aunty starts telling me the words, and that makes me cry."

Aunty Violet Harrison, Program Manager, VACCA



When I picture Ruby and Codey in ten years I see them having strong relationships with their family, an unbreakable connection to their country and a growing knowledge of their Culture. The connections to family can now continue. Codey explains what being on country meant to him: *"Being up in Queensland with all my family was deadly. Being on Country fishing and hunting with my Uncles. I love my Nan and I can't wait to see her again."*

Auntie Violet sums up her understanding of the project:

"Overall, to me, the trip achieved the goal of the kids meeting their very large family and seeing and being a part of their country. They saw how it is to live for remote communities, the good and not so good. It gave them life experiences and I hope they will return to visit if not to live. I hope they share the experience with their sisters and their children to come. I know when they do go home, family know them and they will be welcomed. I am so proud of the way the kids adapted to meeting with family each day and they fitted in so well and meeting all their cousins."

Auntie Dee-Ann says: *"They are our babies – they need to know us and our people."*

Through the Return to Country, Ruby and Codey experienced their own culture, heard their own language and stories and spent time with their own community and people on their Country. This is an experience that will strengthen their identity as young Aboriginal people. Ruby reflects:

"This trip has been the best. I got to meet my Nan and all my cousins and Aunties. I love being on Country. I loved hearing all the stories that my Nan was telling us when we were sitting under the stars around the fire. Being with my family I feel like a Queen."

"This is where my family is and I want to spend as much time as I can with them. People have been talking for ages about getting me and my brother up to Coen and Lockhart River and we finally did it! I love my family and I can't wait to come back."

Every child deserves to feel proud about who they are. For Aboriginal children, particularly those who are vulnerable or at risk, understanding their culture has a healing and protecting effect, giving them the confidence to believe in themselves and pass on their cultural knowledge to the next generation.

Ruby and Codey are now regularly communicating with their family in Cohen via Facebook and email. Ruby is talking about her next trip, which she hopes will take place at the end of 2015.

The Koorie Tiddas Youth Choir is a collaboration between VACCA and Songlines Aboriginal Music Corporation. Songlines offers opportunities for Aboriginal girls and young women to participate in positive, fulfilling and creative after-school activities, under the musical direction and support of Jesse Lloyd, Artistic Director at Songlines. The Choir aims to improve the participants' self-esteem, confidence, resilience and sense of identity through connection to Aboriginal culture and local community, learning traditional language, acquiring music skills and performing their own songs. The choir started in October 2010 and recorded their first CD in 2013.

The girls involved in the Koorie Tiddas are supported by case workers in our Extended Care Program (which plays an important role in providing children with safe, stable and culturally appropriate foster care placements when they are unable to live at home) and Leaving Care program. We work within a holistic model at VACCA and every child is supported by a care team which includes the workers from our Cultural Programs area. Cultural Program workers regularly meet, email and make contact with the case workers to keep them updated with any issues – good or bad – that take place in the choir sessions.



Leaving Care

Aboriginal young people leaving care and transitioning to independent living are very vulnerable. At a young age they will need to develop more skills to manage on their own than other young people their age. Their capacity to do this will largely depend on the transitional planning and support they receive by their care team and the leaving care worker in their preparation and transition to independent living.

This program provides culturally appropriate support to young people who are living in out of home care or have recently exited care to transition into supported independent living. Leaving Care staff play an important role in ensuring young care leavers obtain safe, affordable and long term housing, develop the necessary self-care and social skills to live on their own with support and are connected to culture on exiting care. They also play a role in assisting the young person to participate in education, training or employment.

Proud of Who we Are

The key author in the Koorie Tiddas/ Leaving Care narrative is Jodi Hunt (Leaving Care Case Worker, VACCA). Jodi includes the voice and comments of Jolene Priestly (Leaving Care client). The focus is on Jolene's engagement in Cultural Programs, such as the Koorie Tiddas and how this has supported her development and feeling of belonging and strength in her identity.

Jolene is a 20 year old Yorta Yorta woman, a singer, performer and visual artist.

Jolene has grown up in out of home care. She had been disconnected from her community, family and culture, and when she first began with VACCA she was living on the streets. She had a traumatic past, and so life, as it is today, continues to bring her big challenges.

I really love and admire this woman. I admire her resilience and ability to make changes even when her circumstances, and the odds, were against her.

Many of the young people we work with face separation, loss of knowledge and discontinuity in family and key relationships. These experiences often lead to a lack of trust in other relationships and trauma is revisited.

It has been a pleasure working with Jolene and seeing her grow. With me in the role of her case-worker, over the two years of working together, Jolene and I have built a strong relationship and I have grown to care for her deeply. I believe that Jolene's participation in VACCA's Cultural Programs has assisted her to change her trajectory because together they have supported her to build cultural and community connections and to find her place. Jolene explains:

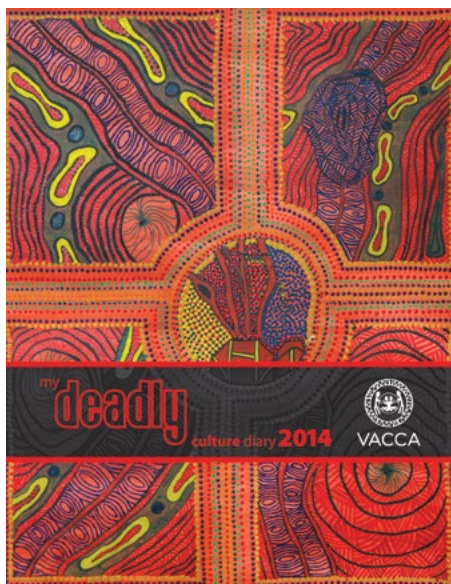
"I think the Cultural Programs have helped me heal, they've helped me find out who I really am and what I can do."

Over the years one remarkable thing about Jolene is that no matter how challenging life has been at the time, and no matter how freely she is able to participate, she has insisted on attending the Cultural Programs. Jolene has been a VACCA Leaving Care client since early 2011.

Jolene's artwork is on the cover of the 2014 VACCA Cultural Diary.

Jolene painted this piece after performing with the Skin Choir at the Folk, Rhythm and Life Festival in 2012.

Jolene explains what the painting is about.



*How I felt
when I was in the presence of my ancestors
and Mother Nature made me feel
the waves of waterholes
and the witchetty grubs from the land
provided today*

*And you see a lot of creeks now
so it reflects on how Mother Nature makes you feel
inside and out ...*

*The middle represents where we stayed
and this is the life I believe in
wisdom, courage, confidence
and believe I can do anything
if I put my mind to it
and enjoy
life, for how it is ...*



Over that time Jolene has chosen to engage more and more with the Cultural Programs. These include: Koorie Tiddas choir, Skin choir, Song writing and performing with Uncle Kutcha and Archie Roach, Emu egg carving, Billum making, Blaktraks-Making, writing poetry and making a short film at the Koorie Heritage Trust. Jolene explains that the Cultural Programs give her the opportunity to interact with positive people who want the best for her. Jolene has also pursued creative quests in her own time, creating paintings and sculpture.

Jessie is the Artistic Director of Songlines Aboriginal Music, the Koorie Tiddas and the Skin choir. Alongside Jessie, the Cultural Program Coordinators at VACCA, Alli-Jade Briggs and Sarah Diplock, put their heart and soul into ensuring young Aboriginal people have the opportunity to connect to their cultural identities and community.

Through the programs, the young people build strong networks with each other and bonds with the Elders. The Elders are generous with their spirit and time and they pass on their wisdom and talents. They take special care to mentor the young people who have been displaced due to being out of home.

First, Jolene joined the Koorie Tiddas choir with a few younger girls. They had the opportunity to work with some artists and mentors such as Archie Roach and Uncle Kutcha. I had the opportunity to be present while the choir worked with Uncle Kutcha to learn about their country and language and write a song in language with him. Uncle Kutcha shared a lot of his knowledge and promoted pride in their culture. The young people were enthralled by his every word and each member wrote a verse about their own country and language group. From the way they engaged, I could see how working with mentors such as Uncle Kutcha helped these young people to feel proud of who they are and proud of their cultural identities.



Throughout this program, Uncle Kutcha shared his story of his country and family as well as his story of being stolen as a child. He asked each member of the group which country they were from and when some of them established that they were related to Uncle Kutcha, their faces showed excitement and pride. Through talking with them, Uncle Kutcha helped shape the language the young people used to invoke more confidence. For example, one young person used the term 'half caste' referring to themselves; Uncle Kutcha explained that they are a full Koorie person. In this way, he managed to address prejudices which the young people had been conditioned to believe for themselves in a way that they understood, so that their confidence was visibly lifted.

The song which the young people wrote is called 'Proud of who you are'. The verse which Jolene wrote says:

*I descend from Yorta Yorta people
From the long neck turtle land
Through to the rivers and the trees
United we need to stand*

Proud of who we are



After Jolene joined Koori Tiddas she joined the Skin Choir which is a large adult Koorie choir. This choir particularly has provided Jolene with incredible performing opportunities. Each performance is a celebration of their culture, resilience and heritage and each song shares an aspect of their culture, creation story or their own journeys, some of which are sung in language. Events they have performed for include: Sorry day, NAIDOC week, Aboriginal Children's day, Wominjeka museum launch and festival and many more.

Jolene said that she feels like a new person when she performs, like she can do anything.

Jolene explained that the skin choir was an opportunity to take her singing further and make more of a career out of it. While in the Koorie Tiddas she often spent time mentoring the younger girls, in the group In the Skin choir she could really focus on singing.

She went on a tour with Skin around regional Victoria, promoting their music and culture. They performed at a prison, youth centre, University, Markets, YES fest film festival and at an event in Echuca hosted by the Baroona healing centre, to name just a few. Jolene expressed to me how proud she was to be part of such a tour and she enjoyed the unity of the group all working together expressing their pride and strength.

Jolene said that she felt that the tour gave the group the opportunity to work as a team and travel to places they had never been before. She also recognised that they could pass on their pride and strength to other Aboriginal people. Jolene said that the most memorable aspect of the tour was singing in the prison and singing with the prisoners, and that she felt that the choir gave the prisoners a hope for a better future.

Jolene is also a visual artist. She has worked on Indigenous arts programs organised by Sarah Diplock and Alli-Jade Briggs and facilitated by well-respected Aboriginal Elders. First she worked with a Papua New Guinean Indigenous Elder, Aunty Vicki Kinai to make Billums. Billums are woven nets, bags and clothes, made by weaving strong rope, sometimes dyed first, and then weaving into the desired shape. I drove Jolene to the classes and loved to see Jolene's interaction with Aunty Vicki. Aunty shared her stories of culture and resilience while passing on the ancient tradition of making Billums. Jolene looked forward to the classes and really appreciated learning such a special craft. Jolene stated that it was an honour working with Aunty Vicki and learning about her culture at the same time. She learned that Billums were used to catch fish and to carry supplies. Jolene also learned that Aunty Vicki had similar experiences due to colonisation in her country to Aboriginal people in Australia. By the end of the workshops, Jolene had created an amazing woven bag which she was very proud of. She was experiencing significant troubles in her personal life over the time the workshops happened, yet she was determined to attend the classes and complete her Billum.

The next aspect of the art program which Jolene was involved in was Emu egg carving with Aunty Esther. The work that Jolene created in these workshops was phenomenal. All the girls who attended expressed gratitude to learn this ancient Aboriginal Australian craft from a respected Elder. They interacted beautifully with Aunty Esther who had a very maternal relationship with them and the art they produced was incredible. As they worked together, Aunty Esther passed on her history, stories and knowledge. The girls said they were proud to learn, with one member of the group stating that she realised that the knowledge Aunty Esther passed on needs to be passed on through the generations.

As Jolene's worker, I have noticed how the Cultural Programs she has engaged in have really linked her to her community and culture. Jolene is a very shy, introverted person. I believe that these links have prevented her from becoming isolated. I have also seen how Jolene's self-esteem and cultural pride are now strong.

Before Jolene was engaged with these programs she was living on the streets and extremely depressed. She now has a house and an income from her art. I really believe that these programs are vital, particularly for young people who have grown up in out of home care. These are the ones who have missed out on having their culture and heritage as part of their day to day lives and their right to their culture, and for their culture to be valued as an intrinsic part of who they are. When there are so many barriers in these young people's lives from their lack of proper connection to family and community as well as racism and marginalisation

"I think the Cultural Programs have helped me heal, they've helped me find out who I really am and what I can do."

Jolene

and trauma, it is imperative that they regain connection to their Community and culture so that they can build strength, resilience and pride.

Part of my role with VACCA is to assist my clients to find some belonging after a childhood of fragmented relationships and loss of connection to community and culture. We aim to assist our clients to find belonging and pride in a society which discriminated against them for their Aboriginality. I have seen Jolene build a strong sense of self, belonging and pride, and Jolene and I both believe that the Cultural Programs have made a significant difference to her life, as it is today.

Jolene was involved in VACCA's 2014 Art Mentoring program, which culminated in a NAIDOC 2014 Exhibition. She is also involved in a film project that is a follow up to one that she was involved in back in 2007. Jolene continues her involvement with the Koorie Tiddas and Skin Choir. In spite of some considerable challenges, she continues to view the opportunities provided through the Cultural Programs as a safe place where she belongs.

The Connecting to Sea Country Project aims to increase understanding and celebration of Aboriginal culture within the school, amongst both staff and students, thereby providing a more supportive environment for Aboriginal students. This program seeks to increase the students' knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and heritage in Melbourne. It supports the young people involved to develop an awareness of how to care for sea country and why this is important. This strengthens their collective appreciation of their identity and achievements.

VACCA has had a relationship with Pelican expeditions for the last four years and has had the opportunity to take children out on their boat for one-off trips. The day trip involves students taking an excursion on a

catamaran. Marine scientist Harry Breidhal introduces the students to the bay's marine ecology from the perspectives of Western marine science and environmental management. Boonwurrung Elder Aunty Carolyn Briggs shares her stories of the Aboriginal heritage of Port Phillip Bay, including the Boonwurrung sea country story *The Time of Chaos*¹⁰, drawing on Aboriginal narrative traditions to do this. Whilst on the catamaran, young people begin developing their ideas and concepts for creating short digital stories, capturing their responses to the day's experience, to the bay, and to its Aboriginal heritage.

In conversations with Natalie Davey, one of the Pelican coordinators, we knew students were keen to take the learning element further. From these

conversations developed a plan to run digital story telling workshops with children after their day on the boat to expand their experience and unpack the knowledge that is passed on by Aunty Carolyn and Harry Breidhal. In 2012, VACCA, Pelican Expeditions, Aunty Carolyn Briggs and Youthworx media came together and planned out an eight week program that would optimise the cultural and scientific learnings of the children. We offered to work in partnership with Thornbury High School which has a high Koorie student population. This is an example of the importance of collaboration and partnerships to bring the best learning to young people in a school setting.



¹⁰ Please see Appendix 2 for the 'Time of Chaos' story.

Connecting to Sea Country

Story

The key author of this narrative is Alli – Jade Briggs (Cultural Programs Project Worker, VACCA). The other voices in the story are students (Thornbury High School), Teaching staff (Thornbury High School), Aunty Carolyn Briggs (Boonwurrung Elder) and Harry Breidhal (Marine Scientist).

With the gentle breeze and sun shining on my skin, I looked over the water that the boat was gliding across and it was then I realised just what an amazing experience this is for the young people aboard the Pelican 1. Growing up I had been very fortunate to attend a primary school that had an Indigenous section where culture was quite an important aspect and was worked into the weekly curriculum. That is something very rare and isn't seen in today's schools. It is so important that we strive to create change for the future of young Aboriginal people. That change is for culture to be included in all aspects of their lives, particularly education, so they can become more informed about their identity.

Jane Brown, a teacher from Thornbury High that was involved in the project stated *"It allowed Aboriginal youth to connect with their identity and culture while also gaining skills in storyboarding. It was an opportunity to celebrate Koorie culture and indigenous education. Students clearly enjoyed their time on the boat and the work that followed. They*

produced some great work and were proud of themselves and their culture. It was great to watch students involved in such a positive program. These programs provide indigenous students with the opportunity to develop knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal students need to feel valued and proud of their culture. By including these programs Koorie students will be more engaged and will have access to a more inclusive curriculum."

I am a young Bangerang woman and grew up in Shepparton, Victoria. I began working in the Cultural Programs team two years ago and have been mentored and slowly built confidence in my role. Being quite young and not having an experience in running any programs, it has been a real learning experience for me both personally and professionally.

In Term 1 this year I had the opportunity to work on the Connecting to Sea Country project with 18 students from Thornbury High School along with Aboriginal Elder, Aunty Carolyn Briggs, and Marine Scientist, Harry Bridle and staff from Youthworx productions. Through running this project with Thornbury High School, we were aiming to build the young people's confidence and strengthen in their culture and doing so we hoped that they would become more engaged with school and promote the pride and value of Aboriginal culture within the school. I believe that if the young people feel a greater sense of belonging within the school it will increase attendance and participations with their education.



Connecting to Sea Country



a student stating *"It was the first time I have ever been on a boat and got to swim in the ocean."* All of the students were so captured by her story with another student, Mikayla, saying that *"When Aunty Carolyn told her story; I was very interested in what she had to say. I had no idea that a thousand years ago the water that we were sailing on wasn't there, it was land. I thought that she was passing on her knowledge to us, so that hopefully we will pass it on throughout our lives so that the knowledge can be shared."*

The youth involved in the project were able to spend time with and build a relationship with Aunty Carolyn throughout this process. The relationships built with her had a magnificent impact with many of the young people, with some young people being relatives of hers. Luke, a student shared that *"I enjoyed the stories Aunty Carolyn told us about the creation of Port Phillip and Bunjil then she told me she was a relation from the Briggs side. I felt a connection to Aunty Carolyn because my totem is a wedged-tailed eagle AKA Bunjil."*

Witnessing the way in which Aunty Carolyn interacts with the young people, made me smile and feel so very privileged to be able to experience that moment too. It is moments like those that make me really love the job that I have.

The young people were also very fascinated by the boat and the crew.



Emma Bamblett, one of the young people's parents said: *"We think it's very important to run cultural programs within the school. It makes the kids proud to talk about where they are from and show cases their work to everyone in the school and community. It also helps kids to have conversations in the home about their culture. For example, Courtney loved to tell us about the day she had out at sea, she had so much fun and the other siblings loved hearing it."*

The project involved a number of significant moments for me personally, beginning with getting to experience a day trip to Rickett's Point on the Pelican 1 Expeditions over the Port Phillip Bay with the young people from Thornbury High, and sharing the amazing moment of Aunty Carolyn teaching her cultural knowledge through story telling. It was really nice to be able to be there to experience for many of the young people their very first boat ride and the first time that they had ever swam in the ocean, with Latisha,

Another great experience for me throughout this project was the time I was able to spend with the children and hear their thoughts and opinions on culture. As tomorrow's leaders it is so important to hear their voice and to make sure that they are always heard within the community so that today's leaders can pave the way for them. To see such young people be so proud and confident in their culture and see others embrace their culture and identity, was very moving because there were a number of participants that were quite disconnected from their culture and identity. The reason that we run cultural programs is to create or strengthen the connection to culture for today's youth.

Listening to an Aboriginal Elder, or any Elder for that matter, is a very fortunate opportunity to have. I often wish that I had the opportunity now to sit with my own grandfather to simply just be in his presence or to learn things from him that I'd love to know about my people, culture and family because there will always be questions even when you think you already knew what you needed to. There are so many youth that don't have the opportunity at any stage in their lives to speak with their grandparents and learn directly about their family history, traditions and customs, which can be so devastating. Making a connection with someone that has so much knowledge can be so significant to a young person's confidence and really build up their spirit and that is something very we are striving to do in all the work that we do. Shania, a student shared that *"Aunty Carolyn knows a lot of history about her culture and where she comes from. I felt privileged to be listening to an Elder and learning from her."*



Elders are the teachers of culture and the young people are the students who will one day be the next generation's teachers. It is important that there is the opportunity for our young people to learn about their culture so that they are confident in sharing the knowledge that they have learnt. This is a critical cycle in keeping young Indigenous people informed and culturally strong, safe and protected. I think that the power of knowledge has been forgotten about in a sense and it needs to once again become our priority. Because culture is being strong in who you are, knowing where you are from and what we could be with all the right tools. With all the work that we do at VACCA our vision is to see that our children, young people, families and communities are thriving and are culturally strong, empowered and safe. We aim to do this by giving the young people the opportunities to learn about their culture wherever possible and to spend time with the Elders, to feel proud of who they are. Teaching the young people something they can go home and share with their, mum, dad, brothers, sister or their cousins and that is where all of the sharing starts. If there are even just a few young people that can say that have learnt something from any of our projects or are just that bit prouder of their identity then we know we are doing our jobs. Culture is not something that can be measured by quantity but quality.

From this project the young people also learnt about the science that supported the traditional story shared with them. Marine Scientist, Harry Bridle, shared some facts throughout the day that really emphasised the truth behind The Time of Chaos. He shared that "Linking traditional knowledge and



scientific findings was one of the key elements of Connecting with Sea Country aboard the Pelican 1 in 2013. As a marine scientist I have always been fascinated by the Aboriginal oral tradition recounting past times when Port Philip Bay was dry and their ancestor's hunted kangaroos and emu on grassy plains before a great flood filled the Bay. It is rare for indigenous stories and scientific findings to go hand-in-hand, but in this case the scientific evidence seems to correlate closely with the stories that have been orally passed down over many generations. Recent scientific findings now show us that around 2,800 years ago the entrance to Port Philip Bay became blocked, cutting off the Bay from Bass Strait. As a result, the Bay dried out to create the grassy plain described in Aboriginal tradition. Around 1,000 years ago the blockage at the Heads broke down and the Bay was quickly filled with a catastrophic flood. What better way to learn about these amazing events than aboard the Pelican 1 on Port Phillip Bay with those long lost grassy plains just below us."

The greatest message that was passed on in Connecting to Sea Country was the importance that sharing stories plays in Aboriginal culture. This group of young people are so very lucky to have learnt such a valuable lesson. I hope to see them carry all the knowledge that they have learnt with them and embrace it in their future.

Since the Sea Country project we have run programs with students at Thornbury High for VACCA's 2013 Wominjeka Festival. The school, following contact with our Cultural Programs team, ran a cultural day in 2014 based on our support and advice. The Sea Country project was run at Manor Lakes College in 2014.

A Time of Chaos

story from Connection to Sea Country

Aunty Carolyn Briggs

Many years ago the *biik* we now call greater Melbourne extended right out to the *warreeny*. Nairm was then a large flat grassy plain. The Yarra River, as it is known today, flowed out across this flat plain into the *warreeny*. For the Boonwurrung, this *wurneet* was known as *Birraring*.

This large plain was covered in *buath* and *tarrang biik* on which the boonwurrung man hunted *guyeem* and *barramaeel*. The *bagurk* cultivated the *murnong*. They collected food from the *wurneet* and *warreeny* and harvested the *iilk* that migrated through there each year.

The Boonwurrung were the custodians of their *biik* but traded with and welcome people from other parts of the Kulin Nation. They obeyed the laws of Bundjil, who travelled as an eagle, and *waang*, who travelled as a crow.

One day - many, many years ago - there came a time of chaos and crisis. The Boonwurrung and the other Kulin Nations were in conflict. They argued and fought. They neglected their *biik*. The *murnong* was neglected. Too many animals were killed and not always eaten. The *gurnbak* were caught during their spawning season. The *iilk* were not harvested.

As this chaos grew, the *warreeny* became angry and began to rise. The *wurneet* became flooded and eventually the whole flat plain was covered in *baany*. It threatened to flood their whole *barerarerungar*.

The people became frightened, went to Bundjil, their creator and spiritual leader. They asked Bundjil to stop the *warreeny* from rising.

Bundjil was angry with his people, and he told them that they would have to change their ways if they wanted to save their land. The people thought about what they had been doing and made a promise to follow Bundjil.

Bundjil walked out to the *warreeny*, raised his *tjeera* and directed the *warreeny* to stop rising. Bundjil then made the Boonwurrung promise that they would respect the laws.

The *baany* never subsided but stayed to create a large bay that the Boonwurrung called *Nairm*. Today it is known as Port Phillip Bay. The *warreeny* took away much of the *biik* of the Boonwurrung and their *barerarerungar* was reduced to a narrow strip of coastline.

The Boonwurrung learnt from their mistakes. They returned to their old values and the laws of Bundjil. They took greater care of Bundjil and the *bubup* of Bundjil.

They met with the other Kulin people and sorted out their differences through sports, debates and dances. One of the most important laws that Bundjil required was for Boonwurrung people to always welcome visitors, and of Bundjil, not hurt the *biik* of Bundjil and not harm the *bubup* of Bundjil.

Today, the *wurneet* that once flowed through this large flat plain still flows under the *Nairm*.

Wrapped in Culture: Possum Skin Cloak Project

Back Story



"Possum-skin cloaks were traditionally made by Koorie people, both as a significant article of clothing and a marker of personal identity and status. A cloak was first made for the wearer after birth, and more pelts were added as the person grew to adulthood. Today, possum skin cloaks are made as a way to reconnect with culture. For the children involved in this project, the opportunity to learn the skills of cloak-making is hugely important. It gives them a sense of who they are and grounds them in their heritage."

Caroline Martin, Manager of Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum

VACCA first became involved in Possum Skin Cloak making through a short workshop organised at the first Wominjeka Festival in 2009. After successfully receiving a grant to run the Possum Skin Cloak Project, the VACCA Cultural Programs team promoted the project to managers, team leaders and case workers at VACCA who then took the information to foster and kinship carers to encourage attendance. We had a great response to the project with 40 children taking part over the duration of the project and 32 children contributing designs to the cloaks.

One of the greatest challenges in running cultural programs is the logistics of getting children to and from the workshops. For this project we used the residential location where the children in our community care, kinship care and residential care units actually lived. There were in four distinct areas – Northern; Hume; Eastern and Western regions of Melbourne. We decided to run the workshops there to enable easier access for carers and families. Previously we had held these workshops exclusively in the Northern Region of Melbourne.

Four meetings were held with VACCA staff, Vicki Couzens and Kim Moulton, to map out the project and plan the outline of each workshop. We also accepted an invitation from Bunjilaka Melbourne Museum to exhibit the finished cloaks in the Birrarung Gallery to be formally opened at a launch during NAIDOC Week 2013. Jane Harrison from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria included our project in their Cultural Strengthening Film Project, enabling us to film and create two documentaries of the project and the practice of making a possum skin cloak.

We planned the logistics of the workshops: where they would be held; how many would be needed and what would be done at each workshop.

We created promotional material and distributed that to the children, carers, managers and caseworkers. We sent out consent forms, booked locations and finalised numbers for each workshop.

The planning and developing phase ran from September 2012 to January 2013.

The Possum Skin Cloak project works to build respectful relationships with local Aboriginal Elders, artists and community members, who will be positive role models and mentors to the young participants. It is designed to provide the opportunity to strengthen the experience of children in VACCA programs through experiencing Aboriginal culture including stories and language, through spending time with Elders and through the making of the cloaks. Cultural practices are passed on to children and young people who then help to contribute to the maintenance and revival of the practice of possum skin cloak making, and support the participants in becoming the next generation of educators. Our aim through this activity is to strengthen the pride and confidence of the children in their Aboriginal identity. We also found the actual practice of making the cloaks to be therapeutic and healing for the children involved. We believe that through exploring the cultural knowledge and practice of possum skin cloak making with the children, families and VACCA workers we have collectively discovered the healing use of possum skin cloaks, and how these can support ongoing therapeutic healing work with children and young people experiencing trauma beyond the project's duration.

Wrapped in Culture: Possum Skin Cloak Project

Story

The key author of the Possum Skin Cloak Project narrative is Sarah Diplock (Team leader Cultural programs, VACCA). The other voices are Muriel Bamblett (CEO, VACCA), Vicki Couzens (Gunditjmara artist and project facilitator), Aunty Esther Kirby (Barap Nation Elder and project facilitator) and children from VACCA out of home care and kinship care programs.

"It's meant a lot to me to share knowledge that I was taught when I was a child, because some of these children haven't got anyone to teach them anything. It feels good to give them the information that connects to them as well. Because some of these children don't feel connected and through doing the possum skin cloaks and making the little wrist bands and talking while their working and telling them about the birds, how we're all interconnected and nobody is ever alone, no one's ever alone because we are interconnected. And these children, I think they are finally getting it. We've helped the ones that are sort of connected to my country and it's given them an idea where they're connected and so they've started to put their finger on how they're connected, so that's good." Aunty Esther Kirby

I have worked for nearly nine years alongside children in VACCA care. Firstly this was as the education support worker and for the last five years I have helped coordinate cultural programs for children and young people. The possum skin cloak project is one of the projects in our cultural programs. For me, it highlights the impact of cultural programs for the children and the Elders and adults involved. It is the reason why, in spite of constant challenges, we continue to work hard to ensure these programs keep taking place. As Aunty Esther highlighted, it is so important to know where you belong and who you connect with. For me this is a story of strength, hope and celebration. It is a story that needs to be told. It is about the healing journey of Aboriginal children in out of home care and how culture and relationships are central to the success of this journey.

The possum skin cloak project was facilitated by Aunty Esther Kirby, Vicki Couzens, Maree Clarke and Kim Moulton. We have a lot of respect for each other and all came together to plan the project. We all passionately believe in the impact such projects have on the children. A few weeks into the project I received an email from Aunty Esther saying *"I look forward to these cloak making sessions and hope that I'm teaching the children something important other than cloak making. I appreciate the opportunity you've given me, and treasure the time with the children."* I was very touched to know how much being part of the project meant to Aunty Esther, but it also reinforced the intergenerational journey our projects generate and the impact the project has for all involved.



Wrapped in Culture:

Possum Skin Cloak Project

The children were mentored and guided to learn the practice of making a possum skin cloak from beginning to end. They did the drawings, planning, cutting, sewing and transferred the designs onto the possum skins. It was beautiful to watch the passing on of cultural knowledge and to see the importance of this resonate with the children. As Aunty Esther had hoped in her email message, the children were learning more than the practice of cloak making. For Amee, one of the participants, *"my favourite thing was Aunty Esther sewing with me and she's been telling me a lot about her family. Her history."* Khan stated *"I feel good about being part of this project. It's fun to do sewing, and it's good to know that there's lots of other Aboriginal people in Melbourne that you can hang out with"*. Stories were bringing the children and Elders together and relationships were nurtured and growing as we went along.

I often see things that really impact on me and reinforce the importance of culture in the lives of Aboriginal children, especially when it has been absent. On a visit to Bunjilaka at the beginning of the project, the children were quite noisy and running around. They found it hard to settle. When we moved into the collections room, the change in all the children was amazing. It was like they knew that they were surrounded by their ancestors through the objects and artefacts laid out on the tables. Calmness came over the group and the children were given gloves to put on so they could hold the objects. They were very gentle when touching the objects and you could tell that the experience really resonated with them! I found the whole experience very moving. One of the boys went up to Vicki and said

"I want to keep these gloves from the awesomeness of touching the people and the things." Vicki came over to share that with me and she was very moved.

Vicki believes that *"the children are really important in the way that they facilitate that cultural knowledge exchange. We can get the kids to develop their own artworks and designs talking around family and community and culture. The idea of putting onto the possum cloak is a collective story."* Ruby, one of the young girls on the project, took a key role in mapping out the design of one of the cloaks and creating a snake design to fill in the empty spaces and to link all the children's artwork together. She commented at the end of the project *"I felt being part of this project pretty proud, and it helps me to educate other people!"* Whilst Sharna, one of the oldest participants at 16, reflected *"this project has helped me grow as a person actually. I've learnt more about my culture, and I've done it with my sister, so we learnt together."*

There are many challenges to organising a project. Because of the experience we have in working with vulnerable children at VACCA, a lot of our planning helps minimise the risks related to children who are vulnerable and traumatised participating in these projects. For example we are in constant communication with case workers to understand what is occurring in the children's lives and to gauge their reactions to the project; we also plan small groups so the children don't get overwhelmed.

But there are also challenges that we don't anticipate! During the possum skin project Ruby asked if she could take a possum skin cloak to her school as they were studying ancient civilisations and she felt the teachings she had learnt from Aunty Esther and Vicki were a good fit for the unit of work. I arranged to meet her at school and I took in the cloak and made an information pack for each student and the teacher and met with the teacher and commented how great it was she was supporting Ruby in sharing her culture and feeling safe enough to do so! I left the teacher with my email address and phone number so she could contact me if she had any questions.

The next day I received a call from Ruby's carer saying the school had rung her and was shocked by the cloak and they couldn't possibly show it to the children as this would upset them too much as it was made from possum skins. They asked that the cloak and the information packs be picked up by me as soon as possible. They didn't however ring me and ask to help them understand the practice and how it could be taught to Ruby's class. It was sad that the school was unable to share Ruby's pride in her culture but I was so proud that Ruby had made those links and wanted to share and educate her class mates.

We need to support the children and help them understand that this is not a reflection on them or their culture but the need of the broader community to learn to respect and value the cultural heritage of this country, and to be open to be informed.

As time went on the children were able to articulate what they were learning and what it meant to be a part of the project. Sharna commented *"we're all working together on the same cloak and it's a really good project to be a part of because it's connecting everyone to learn about their culture."* Jason reflected *"we can learn about our culture and our Koorie history. And our ancestors – what did they do, what did they use."* And Clive could see the connection between the past and the present when he said *"They wear these [cloaks] a long time ago and when we saw the pictures some of them looked like our uncles, dads and aunties."* The children's capacity to sit in the space and listen also grew.



"We're all working together on the same cloak and it's a really good project to be a part of because it's connecting everyone to learn about their culture."

Sharna

Wrapped in Culture: Possum Skin Cloak Project

Story

Aunty Esther particularly noticed the transformation. *"Working with the children when I first heard about it and I was thinking it was a little bit daunting. However the children were a little bit out there, but they have calmed right down since we have been doing these workshops. You can notice the difference; it's a gradual change. When we were doing the cloaks when I first come up, they were a little bit noisy. Then I noticed, those noisy children that messed about a bit, when they wrapped the other possum skin cloaks around themselves they changed from that up there 'rah rah rah' to a quieter chilling and answered more calmly and things like that. And I noticed a couple of times that I was thinking, now am I seeing what I am seeing? And as they changed the cloak to each child, they just changed, their personalities changed. And they were becoming these quieter children, and I was thinking, this is very calming and therapeutic for the children. I'd heard about it but I hadn't seen it close up."*

As we were coming to the end of the project Muriel's words were playing in my head: *"I think for young people culture is about healing – knowing who you are, knowing where you come from. We want young people to grow up and be strong and proud and if the thing that makes them most vulnerable is the lack of culture then we have to do everything we possibly can."* I see the change and healing for the children and adults through projects like this. I feel in spite of the challenge to constantly look for funding to run programs such as these, we owe it to the children and families to bring them these experiences.

In one of the first workshops an Aboriginal foster carer attended with the two children in her care. Vicki walked up to her and placed a cloak she had made for the Melbourne Commonwealth Games around the carers shoulders. Almost immediately the carer started to cry. She said she felt that she was being wrapped up and supported by her ancestors, and then quietly said *"I have a lot of healing to do!"* My hope is that the children in VACCA care have been supported on their cultural journey so that they do not feel what that carer did when they reach adulthood. As Muriel said, we have to do everything we possibly can.

After five months of coming together and hearing stories, yarning with each other and creating a collective story for each cloak you could really see the pride and connection the children had made between each other; with Vicki, Maree, Kim and Aunty Esther; and to their own identity. At the end of the

project, the children's work was brought together in an exhibition at Bunjilaka, Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum. The children all came to the launch to see their work honoured and celebrated. Amee, one of the young participants summed up the project and her place of belonging that day when she said *"Possum skin cloaks are important because they represent Aboriginal culture and they are a part of us."*

VACCA is currently planning an information session for staff and carers run by Vicki Couzens on the healing properties and protocols around using possum skin cloaks. We have had discussions with Vicki around running training sessions for young people such as Ruby to become facilitators in running future possum skin cloak projects. A possum skin cloak project with kinship carers is planned for 2015.

Naghlindah Boorais Beautiful Children

You and a guest are invited to the official exhibition opening of
**Naghlindah Boorais
Beautiful Children**

Thursday, 11th July 2013, 10.30am
Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre,
Melbourne Museum

Share in a journey with Naghlindah Boorais (beautiful children) as they explore their cultural identity through the making of possum skin cloaks.
A project led by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in partnership with Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre.

Melbourne Museum
Nicholson Street, Carlton (Melways ref 2B J10)
Underground car parking available

RSVP Thursday 4 July
Telephone (03) 8341 7784
Email bunjilakarsvp@museum.vic.gov.au
Presented as part of the Bunjilaka Community Exhibition Program





Summation

There are common themes that have emerged from the projects we have covered in this narrative evaluation. Through these activities we have learned many things which we will incorporate into our practice in the future. Our analysis is based on our collective observations and reflections. They come from our knowledge and experience as participants and as VACCA workers who are close to the children.

These projects affirm our belief that there is a need for Aboriginal culture to be embedded throughout our practice, as this provides the necessary scaffolding to support Aboriginal children and young people to be culturally strong and proud of their identity.

The positive impact of the activities we ran, we believe, highlights the need for VACCA to run a consistent program of cultural activities perennially. The engagement of children in cultural activities also needs to be underpinned by a plan which addresses the cultural needs of the child and supported through Cultural Support Plan workers. Cultural Support Plans need to be “living” documents which record as well as plan. They need to be a reference and a personal memento.

The Cultural Programs within VACCA currently have the capacity to support and deliver a limited range and number of activities. Some activities need strong collaboration and partnerships, to help achieve the best outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people and require more intensive planning and preparation. The potential for partnerships exist both internally and externally to VACCA however, implementing partnerships outside of core business can be challenging.

Unfortunately access to cultural knowledge is not a given for Aboriginal children and young people in care. VACCA’s holistic approach to program delivery provides opportunities for children and young people in care to engage and learn about their culture and their history. As Yolanda Finette says, *“All of the children we work with are at different stages of their cultural journey and it is essential that each individual journey is captured through research and development work.”* This is the work that needs to be documented in the Cultural Support Plans and provides the recommendations for the case workers and foster carers to follow through with to ensure that access to cultural knowledge is available to every child in VACCA’s care.

The Elders involvement in the programs shows the impact of knowledge sharing. Aunty Esther’s narrative account in *“Wrapped in Culture”* highlights that it is the interconnected nature between people, culture and country that helps to build resilience in children and young people. Building that sense of belonging for children and young people who are not able to live with their family is integral; to feel connected and feel safe in community helps to build resilience.

The impacts we have identified within this evaluative process are: identity and belonging; culture as a protective and healing factor; storytelling; relationships; consistency of support and opportunities; cultural support plans; and education. The following is a description of how evidence for each is revealed in the narratives.



Summation

Identity and Belonging

To know your identity and feel a sense of belonging are essential to the healing journey for the children and young people with whom we work. We have witnessed when Aboriginal children and young people feel strong and proud of their Aboriginal identity, and feel connected to their culture they have a greater ability to deal with adverse and challenging situations in their lives. This is evidenced through the experiences of the young people we work with; their engagement with VACCA does not end when they leave our programs. For example, for Jolene, her experience in leaving care and her participation in the choirs has supported her: *"I feel proud of who I am and how far I have come. The choir has connected me to my culture and I have more cultural knowledge including other language groups."* Another example for the impacts of these programs is shared by Luke, a student who was involved in the Connection to Sea Country project. *"I enjoyed the stories Auntie Carolyn told us about the creation of Port Phillip and Bunjil then she told me she was a relation from the Briggs side. I felt a connection to Auntie Carolyn because my totem is a wedged-tailed eagle AKA Bunjil."*

At VACCA we know the negative effects of children not being connected to their family and culture, as Bev Murray, the Program Manager of Link-Up states; *"Based on our experience, our people's wellbeing is severely affected when they grow up away from family not knowing anything about their culture and traditional country."* The narratives have explored just a few of the programs that VACCA delivers, and they show evidence of the relationships developed, the trust formed and the sense of self that is deepened. As Muriel Bamblett reflects; *"I think having this project, and all our projects at VACCA are aimed at strengthening identity, letting children know they come from a rich history and having Aboriginal children feel strong in themselves."* For children and young people in out of home care, who do not have a strong connection to their family, community or culture, we know that through the opportunities given in these programs, we can support the building of trusting relationships and strengthen their cultural knowledge.

Culture as a protective and healing factor

At VACCA our work with traumatised children, young people and families, is set within a therapeutic framework. As a fundamental principle of our practice and care, we are committed to providing a therapeutic approach to our work. A therapeutic model of practice means: understanding the underlying causes of a child's behaviours; helping the child understand what happened is not their fault; undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the child's needs through the lens of culture; tailoring responses according to the child's individual needs; implementing actions that promote healing, safety, stability and wellbeing; providing consistency and predictability in the child's daily routine and keeping the child informed about all aspects of their case plan; rebuilding and strengthening the child's relationship with their family, community and culture and involving the child in cultural healing practices, including art, story-telling, dance and song.

"I feel proud of who I am and how far I have come. The choir has connected me to my culture and I have more cultural knowledge including other language groups."

Jolene

We know that culture can be both a protective and healing factor, which is why we place importance in embedding cultural practice within our services. What we hear through these narratives is that there is the potential for healing through connection to culture and community. As within the Wrapped in Culture narrative, Aunty Esther says: *"We are also carrying a skill of possum skin cloak making from the old days to today and then we've imparted it onto them children then hopefully them children will impart it onto someone else further down the track. I just wish every kid could have possum skin cloak so when they have their moments when the world's against them they can just go and wrap themselves up and calm themselves down because those cloaks are very magical, it's very therapeutic, and I'm glad I've got mine."*

The example of healing through cultural knowledge being passed on is clearly outlined in Wrapped in Culture and the Koorie Tiddas narratives. The power of relationships and family, stories and country are all highlighted in the Return to Country narrative which explores how these are all powerful ways that Aboriginal children and young people can begin to understand where they belong, who they are and the difference this can make to their lives. The healing takes place on many levels across all the programs. As Wilma insisted in the Return to Country narrative, *"Their Mum has passed on. We need to teach them our ways. They need to know our language. Family makes you strong. We need each other."* Return to Country opportunities should become a central part of the care plan for all our children in care.

"I just wish every kid could have possum skin cloak so when they have their moments when the world's against them they can just go and wrap themselves up and calm themselves down because those cloaks are very magical, it's very therapeutic, and I'm glad I've got mine."

***Aunty Esther Kirby, Project facilitator,
Possum Skin Cloak Project***

We have learnt at VACCA through the Link Up program how important family reunifications are to healing. Bev Murray the Program Manager of Link Up explains her support for the Return to Country pilot program, *"Link-Up Victoria strongly supports any programs or services that ensure our children in care are connected to their family, culture and traditional country because this is the only way to prevent another Stolen Generations."* This shows the intergenerational impact of the work we do, and also the need to have these programs as part of the core funding attributed to out of home care from the Department of Human Services. These return to country opportunities need to be built into the care plan extending the notion of reunification, and therefore the funding framework, rather than for organisations like VACCA having to seek philanthropic funding to enable it.

"I think we're learning a lot about therapeutic practice and I think this project feeds well into what we are learning – the healing and treatment of children. There have been many instances where people have used the cloaks, particularly with Stolen Generations around addressing past trauma and grief and loss so the use of the Possum Skin Cloak as a shield and a remover of trauma and grief and as a comforter. While it starts off as a cultural activity and its very related to moieties and totems it turns into an actual resource that we are able to use therapeutically." Muriel Bamblett, CEO, VACCA

Summation

Storytelling

All the Elders involved in these programs could see the importance of these opportunities to pass on knowledge. There was a shared understanding that children and young people are the key to the continuation of culture. Respected Elder and VACCA staff member, Aunty Violet reflects on watching the three generations of women sitting together on the Return to Country trip. Sharing stories shows the impact and importance of passing on knowledge, and without the opportunity to travel to their Mum's country, this would be lost for Ruby and Codey. For the young people involved in these programs there seems to be an awareness of the importance of passing on this cultural knowledge. As Mikayla reflected in the Connection to Sea Country project, *"When Aunty Carolyn told her story, I was very interested in what she had to say. I had no idea that a thousand years ago the water that we were sailing on wasn't there, it was land. I thought that she was passing on her knowledge to us, so that hopefully we will pass it on throughout our lives so that the knowledge can be shared."*

The impact of storytelling resonates in all of the narratives. It is how knowledge is passed on to each generation and how understandings of culture and identity are shared. For children and young people the importance is not lost. In the Connection to Sea Country narrative we hear how a young participant, Shania understands it: *"Aunty Carolyn told us some deadly history about Port Phillip Bay – the Nairm. She talked about the land and how the bay was dry before the floods. Now the ocean – the warreeny is beautiful."* When Ruby stands up in front of a crowd at a gallery exhibition opening, declaring not to worry because she is the next generation, and she is proud, the impact cannot be lost: storytelling has strengthened her sense of belonging.

This evidence supports our claim that culture, and the opportunities provided through these programs make a difference in the lives of the children and young people we work with. What we also witness in these stories is the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge that these programs support. The community, families and Elders involved also experience healing from sharing their knowledge and seeing the strength this imparts on the children. We are all witness to seeing this knowledge being passed on, to the next generation of cultural knowledge holders.

Relationships

The relationships between Elders, community members, children and young people and VACCA staff takes time to build including the development of trust as a collective. These relationships are nurtured through the work that is done in the cultural programs, where the same Elders are invited back to multiple projects so that the children and young people experience the consistency and reliability that can be missing in their everyday lives. The relationships between the children and VACCA staff is also critical.

The intergenerational healing and learning from the engagement in these programs can be seen woven through the narratives. The engagement of Elders and community members is integral to the programs' success. As Vicki Couzens from the Possum Skin Cloaks project reflected: *"The project is important obviously for the children – for the community. I think when the aunts or the grandmothers come they see the children learning, I think it gives you hope for the future."* These programs provide opportunities for participants to engage in culturally strengthening activities that build resilience for all participants. As Aunty Carolyn reflects on the Sea Country project: *"It's very important to be involved in this project because it's being able to give voice and tell the stories of the ancestors about the creation of that bay. For our young people it's about how our ancestors maintained that story for a long time. I see it brings a balance back to make sense of their world and in the now."*

Consistency of support and opportunities

At VACCA we understand that consistency in program delivery and support enables relationships and trust to build between all people involved in these projects. As Jodi, Jolene's worker, reflected in the Leaving Care narrative, Jolene would have otherwise been isolated if these programs had not been offered, and her sense of identity and self would not be as strong. Jolene continues to want to be involved in the cultural programs offered; this reflects her trust and value in these relationships and programs.

The success of these programs is dependent on the staff involved to adequately plan, support and run the programs with the Elders, artists, community members and young people involved. There is a great demand on individual staff members' time and resources, however as Sarah, team Leader of the Cultural Programs at VACCA, reflects, *"these programs are priceless because we see relationships being nurtured and the young people have a greater sense of who they are and where they belong"*. There has been a consistency of staff within the cultural programs and having a dedicated worker in the role of Cultural Support Plans was critical to the success of the Return to Country in Queensland.

Cultural Support Plans

Cultural Support Plans (CSPs), provide the vital connections and building blocks for the children and young people with whom VACCA works, to understanding more about their families and culture. The role of the worker to connect the young people and their families, to provide a culturally safe place to share knowledge and plan for the lives of these young people is integral to the success of the CSP. Ruby reflected about CSPs, *"I think it's to help us Koorie kids learn about our culture and our heritage and where we're from. I know a lot of kids who have parents that are around to tell them and there are some that don't. And I think that this is a good opportunity for them to understand their culture and their heritage and it's really important for all of us. I think it's a good thing."*

From the engagement in these programs the children and young people build a connection to community and sense of belonging. As Aunty Esther stated, *"It's lovely seeing the change in them little fellas, their self-esteem and their spirits have lifted and have just changed. I notice all those things, especially when little children are hurting because I know how hard the world can be on our people, our people who have gentle souls and gentle spirits and the world has dealt a hard blow to these little fellas but they're bouncing back and they're going to be something. All I can say is watch this space because they are going to be something."*



Summation

Education

While the majority of our programs are run for children in out of home care and connected to VACCA programs, we consciously approach and run programs with schools to support the cultural awareness and understanding and development of teachers and non-Aboriginal students to ensure that Aboriginal children feel culturally safe and supported in the school setting. We see the need for transition of cultural knowledge into the education system. As a teacher who was involved in the Connection to Sea Country Project stated, *"It is so important to run Aboriginal programs at the school. We have no Indigenous teachers at the school and no first hand cultural knowledge. There is limited Aboriginal history within the curriculum and therefore providing such a rich cultural experience is vital to engage Aboriginal youth."*

The impact of these programs goes well beyond the timeframe of the delivery of the programs and filters into other aspects of the children's lives, as the knowledge and skills passed on builds a sense of belonging and identity and empowers the young people. At the Share the Spirit Festival in 2014, three months after the Return to Country trip, a worker witnessed Ruby stand on the open mic stage and announce: *"Hi my name is Ruby and I'm a proud Lama Lama, Wunta Wunta woman."* She then proceeded to sing solo to the festival audience. Amee, who took part in the Possum Skin Cloak project was offended that her school was not teaching anything about Aboriginal culture or local community. When the offer of support to talk to the school and supply resources was made, she informed us that she did not need any help. Amee had gone to the principal herself and told him that she was very disappointed that the school did not teach anything about Aboriginal culture and people and that she thought they should and that she was not the only Aboriginal student at the school and it would mean a lot to all of them if the school would do something. Amee relayed the news that the principal had agreed to run sessions for NAIDOC week and that she was helping organise these. It is encouraging to see Amee finding a voice and having pride in her culture which enables her to recognise her rights and to advocate on her own behalf.

The strength of these programs comes through the planning, developing and consultation with community, Elders, artists and children and young people and through what community have to offer through sharing cultural knowledge and stories. What we have seen through these narratives are the impacts of these programs on the children and young people, staff, Elders and families. These programs have become part of the intergenerational healing journey for all participants. The limitations come with the uncertainty of funding to be able to run consistent programs for the most vulnerable children, living in out of home care. The outcomes and impacts of the programs we have shared provide the evidence that highlights the need for programs such as these to be core funded. This is not just critical for VACCA to roll out but is something that is required across the sector so that all Aboriginal children have access to these opportunities regardless of where they are placed.



Recommendations

Internal

1. Secure ongoing and sustainable funding or long term grants to enable development of a more consistent and ongoing delivery of cultural programs to meet the needs of Aboriginal children in out of home care.
2. Develop an evaluation strategy that allows us to be respectful of Aboriginal stories and knowledge and privilege the voice of children and families with whom we work.
3. Prioritise capacity building of staff in project management and delivery of cultural programs.
4. Support an advisory panel of Aboriginal Elders and artists who can advise and support the development of cultural programs.
5. Create youth training sessions to develop young people in the roles as facilitators and educators of cultural knowledge.
6. Include training of how to work with children and young people in group settings within the trauma training provided to VACCA staff.

Advocacy

1. Continue advocacy to Victorian State Government to recognise cultural programs are critical to contributing to cultural safety and healing for Aboriginal children in care and should be included in core funding.
2. Return to Country opportunities need to be built into the care plan of all the children in out of home care and thus needs to be part of the core funding provided by DHHS.
3. Advocate for resources to employ Education Support Workers to roll out cultural support and learning to the schools that children in VACCA care attend.
4. Grow our cultural programs team so we can consult and provide to mainstream Community Service Organisations and support their work in this area.
5. Secure core funding for a Cultural Support Plan Team within VACCA to further develop this critical work which supports meeting the cultural needs of children in care.

Appendix 1

Notes for the VACCA worker to discuss with service user/parent/young person

As part of our work at VACCA we try to collect stories that showcase the work that we do with children in care, their families and communities.

These stories help us celebrate and value and respect what is important for the children in our care. They can also help us to improve our services to better support the children, families and communities we work with.

Staff:

Please read through this document with the person who you are wishing to gain consent from, either as an adult or in their role as parent/guardian

Once you have explained this to each person you wish to involve please get them to sign this form.

NB: You will need to obtain consent from all parents, if you wish to video or take picture with children at an event, or community gathering. This will need to be done upon arrival, or in the preparation.

Consent should only be given when the person is capable of making an informed decision, and should not be rushed or coerced.

Service user/parent/young person:

We need your help to conduct evaluation effectively. Your feedback about your involvement in _____(name of program/project)_____ and your thoughts about this program will be very helpful.

This evaluation report, including your story, will be shared internally with VACCA staff and externally to the project funders as well as the Department of Human Services. You will receive a CD with photos and video recordings that we will use when the project has been completed. We hope this will be meaningful for you, your family and community as a record of this significant event.

Photo and Film Consent Form - Child/Young Person

Film and Photo Consent Form

Family Participants (over 18 years old)

I, _____, a proud _____
(Name) (which mob)

consent to having the my story on _____ recorded in the following ways
(program/project)

after discussions with _____ .
(VACCA staff member)

I understand that my reflections and stories related to _____
(this project)

may be used as part of the narrative and evaluation to explore the importance of this process for both Ruby and Cody, their family and VACCA staff members involved.

This evaluation report, which will include your story, will be shared internally at VACCA and externally to the project funders as well as the Department of Human Services. You will receive a CD with photos and video recordings that we will use when we have completed to the project as well as any promotional material. We hope it will be meaningful for you, your family and community as a record of this significant event.

I consent to my stories being recorded via the following methods:

- ☐ Written
- ☐ Video Recorded
- ☐ Voice Recording

I consent to photos taken of me to be used by VACCA.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of VACCA worker

Date

Photo and Film Consent Form - Parent/Guardian

Appendix 1

Photo and Video Consent Form

Children and Young People (under 18 years old)

I consent to photos of my child/ren _____ being used by VACCA.

☐ Yes

☐ No

I consent to video of my child/ren _____ being used by VACCA.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Name of Child/ren

Signature of Parent/ Guardian

Signature of VACCA worker

Date

There are many different ways to tell a story, below are some of the projects that we have found useful in developing our own ways.

- Integration of Creative Expression into Community Based Participatory Research and Health Promotion with Native Americans: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2902194/>
- Narrating Aboriginality On-Line: Digital Storytelling, Identity and Healing: <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/740/1004>
- AIATSIS: IT and Wellbeing Initiatives Conference Papers: <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/conf2011/papers/IT2.3.html>
- Participatory Photography for Social Change: <http://www.photovoice.org/>
- Evaluation of the Akeyulerre Healing Centre: http://www.akeyulerre.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/2010_akeyulerre_evaluation_report.pdf
- UNICEF Photo Essays: http://www.unicef.org/photoessays/index-pe_29939.html
- Creative Arts, Culture, and Healing: Building an Evidence Base: http://www.pimatisiwin.com/uploads/jan_2011/01ArchibaldDewar.pdf





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