

# **Working together in a good way: Relationships between local Indigenous and fly-in workers delivering a parent–child programme in remote Aboriginal communities**

**Carolyn Stock**

Menzies School of Health Research, Australia

**Sarah Mares**

University of New South Wales, Australia

**Gary Robinson**

Menzies School of Health Research, Australia

## **Abstract**

This article considers what successful working relationships between fly-in professionals and Aboriginal community workers involve. Interviews with six Aboriginal workers and the experience of the jointly delivered Let's Start parent–child programme in remote north Australian Indigenous communities confirm the importance of developing positive relationships within a both-ways learning approach, drawing on each other's strengths, and the significance of reflection on practice. Working cooperatively enables effective programme implementation, supports incorporation of new learning into practice, and benefits local Aboriginal community members through employment and development opportunities. This model has relevance for health and community programmes delivered in remote Aboriginal communities.

## **Keywords**

Aboriginal community workers, both-ways learning, local implementation officers, parent–child intervention, team relationships

## **Introduction**

There is a growing body of literature about the role, training and credentialing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the health sector (Browne et al., 2013; Drummond, 2014; Harris

---

### **Corresponding author:**

Carolyn Christa Stock, Menzies School of Health Research, PO Box 41096, Casuarina, NT 0810, Australia.

Email: carolin.stock@menzies.edu.au

and Robinson, 2007; Kuipers et al., 2014). In the mental health sector, they are recognised as key service-providers for health promotion and treatment in Aboriginal community contexts (Holland et al., 2013). Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff within multicultural/multi-disciplinary teams is identified as key to culturally safe practices in health (Kuipers et al., 2014). There is an ongoing debate about notions of cultural competence for non-Aboriginal workers and how this differs from generic professional competencies (Kirmayer, 2012; Wendt and Gone, 2011). The term ‘culturally responsive’ has been suggested, describing the capacity to ‘develop collaborative and respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in order to respond to the issues and needs of communities ...’ (Zubrzycki et al., 2014: 21) and as the ‘capacity to respond and work in the local context’ and ‘understand and work with local knowledges and belief systems’ (Young et al., 2013: 192). Acknowledging that this is a critical area, this qualitative study aims to understand how partnerships between fly-in and local Aboriginal staff enable access to both cultural and professional expertise. The aim is to deliver a culturally responsive programme with improved service engagement and outcomes. Efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people have seen an increasing emphasis on early childhood. This includes efforts to strengthen vulnerable families and children through intensive family support, parenting programmes and other early intervention measures (Australian Medical Association, 2013). Along with this, the need has grown for involvement of Aboriginal workers in the set-up, delivery and evaluation of parenting and family support programmes in remote early childhood interventions. Currently, there is very little written about the involvement of local Aboriginal people in early childhood programmes and even less about what constitutes effective working relationships between local Aboriginal workers and fly-in staff.

A major challenge for early intervention programmes in remote Aboriginal communities, including the early childhood sector, is engagement with and retention of parents with diverse needs (Grace and Trudgett, 2012). The Let’s Start (LS) programme is an intervention for Aboriginal parents with young children that has developed an approach to culturally respectful community involvement and family engagement. In this approach, teamwork between local implementation officers (LIOs) and fly-in staff plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of the programme. The fly-in professionals rely on the local workers, their expertise in the community’s knowledge, language and worldview and the translation of this for other colleagues. The LIOs are central to effective engagement of families, enabling the team to develop an understanding of each family’s situation, experience and concerns, to ensure regular attendance and to successfully focus on positive parenting and parent–child relationships (Stock et al., 2012).

In this article, we outline the role of LIOs in the LS programme and describe how integration of differing values, knowledge and skills can create successful working relationships, which are central to family engagement and programme delivery, and explore how these relationships are best supported. The article includes the voices of six local Aboriginal workers who describe what makes for good relationships in a multicultural team. The project was undertaken with a view to strengthening recruitment, training and retention of local Aboriginal workers and to facilitate working relationships between LIOs and fly-in professionals. We hope this leads to an improvement in collaboration between local Aboriginal workers and visiting professionals and believe this has relevance beyond the LS project.

## **Working in a multicultural team in remote Aboriginal communities**

It has been acknowledged that inter-professional collaboration to promote holistic care and a user-centred service has beneficial outcomes (Freeth, 2001). It has also been argued that effective social

work should provide ‘a necessary link between different occupations’ (Lymbery and Millward, 2009: 173). A number of researchers are identifying effective relationships between social workers and Aboriginal people as fundamental to effective social work with Aboriginal people (Bo, 2015; Zufferey, 2012). Zubrzycki et al. (2014) reinforce the importance of collaborative relationships to ensure that interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are ‘timely, respectful, effective and appropriate’ (p. 22). Bennett et al. (2011) report that experienced Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers prioritise the development of relationships with their Aboriginal clients and communities, which are characterised by reciprocity, the integration and valuing of Aboriginal and Western worldviews, and the application of microskills such as deep listening and ‘stillness’.

A literature review showed that in recent years more emphasis has been placed on the importance of effective engagement with Aboriginal communities. Guidelines and processes for engagement with stakeholders have been established, and the development of respectful and trusting relationships is described as ‘key to success’ (Hunt, 2013: 33). A recent review of bicultural practice looked at not only the organisational but also the inter-professional level and identified that ‘Building relationships is the basis of social work and community development’ (McGuinness and Leckning, 2013: 27). A continuous process of ‘on the job learning’ for all members of the team as a process of ‘two-way learning’ and ‘reflective practice’ is described as essential in this report and in related literature about work in Indigenous communities (Laycock et al., 2009). McGuinness and Leckning (2013) established that respect, honesty, flexibility and the importance of teamwork are the basis of two-way learning. This requires acknowledging the skills, language, knowledge, concepts and understandings from both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and notes that participants need to be open enough to see that there can be many ways of reaching a goal. Ober (2009) suggests that ‘shared learning is about drawing knowledge from each other through talking, discussing, debating, challenging, and reflecting. Learning is not in isolation, or in competition, rather it is collaboration’ (p. 38). In the context of the community sector in the Northern Territory of Australia, this refers to a service delivery model which brings ‘together complementary skills and knowledge that are equally valued’ (McGuinness and Leckning, 2013: 19). It is important to recognise and, as Clay and Olitt (2012) emphasise, to honour the differences between members of a work team. Recognition of difference in backgrounds and personalities develops awareness of sensitive cultural differences, which can then be embraced, valued and utilised in the work environment.

The characteristics of a work environment that supports positive teamwork include, as Billett (1993) highlights, access to expert guidance and opportunities to reflect upon practice and on what is learnt from working together. Reflective capacities are identified as essential for the practitioner working with families and young children, both in social work (Horner, 2012) and in other support and intervention roles. Reflective capacities include the deliberate or conscious process of reexamining and revisiting experiences to learn from them, and, it is emphasised, to put these reflections into practice (Horner, 2012). The literature from various disciplines emphasises the process of reflection as central to lifelong learning as well as competent practice (Cox, 2005; Morley, 2007). Providing time for reflection on practice, to improve the quality of interactions with each other and the delivery of the service, is an important element of working in a multicultural team. The concept of both-ways learning and reflective practice is the foundation for work in a multicultural team and involves bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. This nurtures the development of staff and supports incorporation of new learning into practice.

## **The LS programme**

This article draws on our experience of delivering LS, a targeted early intervention group programme which helps parents and young children deal with emotional and behavioural challenges. The

programme has been delivered in remote Aboriginal communities across the North of Australia since 2005, including the Tiwi Islands where 98 per cent of the population in each of the three main communities is Aboriginal (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). LS is delivered as a 10-week programme targeting 4- to 7-year-old children and their parents. The weekly session runs for 2.5 hours and includes a parent's group, an interactive group for parents and their children and a shared meal. It is a semi-structured intervention, requiring skills in both community and family engagement and facilitation of group work to ensure that the programme is delivered professionally, ethically and in a culturally respectful way (Robinson et al., 2012). The team is multidisciplinary and based at the Centre for Child Development and Education at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, Northern Australia. In remote areas, the programme is delivered by two clinically trained fly-in team members and at least one LIO, who lives in the community. LS aims to improve parenting knowledge and skills in order to enhance the quality of the parent-child relationship and improve children's social and emotional competencies. It includes elements of reflective practice and provides a model for evidenced-based early intervention work with families and communities in the Northern Territory (Mares and Robinson, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009; Stock et al., 2012).

## **The LIOs**

Since the initial implementation, it has been a priority to involve local people in the set-up and delivery of the LS programme (Robinson et al., 2012). The relationships between fly-in workers, who travel to the community for 1–2 days a week, and the LIOs are central to programme delivery. The skills and deficits in experience and training of the professional fly-in staff are the inverse of the LIOs; they have tertiary qualifications and experience in delivering interventions with children and families, but limited local knowledge of culture, language or community (Mares and Robinson, 2012). The LIOs are employed as 'experience-based experts' who make unique contributions to the multidisciplinary, multicultural team based on their cultural and community knowledge. The fly-in staff rely on the local workers for application and transfer of their expertise.

The activity of the LIOs varies considerably and is influenced by the capabilities of the worker, the community environment and the needs of participating families. It includes the following range of responsibilities:

- providing cultural education to new staff from outside the community;
- contributing to planning, stakeholder engagement, referrals and data collection;
- improving community knowledge about the LS programme and helping to build trust and understanding between community and the team;
- interpreting language for parents, family members and fly-in staff;
- facilitating delivery of the LS programme;
- participation in feedback and case conferencing within the project team.

A job description and list of role responsibilities was developed to provide a guide for the worker and the programme manager. These are used in a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' process, where roles and responsibilities are discussed with community members. The LIOs describe this process with comments such as 'Well, we have to sit down and discuss what is important for each of us' and 'It's important to do things you think you can do, don't be pushed'.

## **Methods**

This article draws on the experience of 7 years delivering the LS programme on the Tiwi Islands and information from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six female LIOs. These were

conducted to better understand their perspectives about work within the LS team and covered key elements of their role, team processes and interdisciplinary practice.

All those interviewed were mothers ranging in age from 36 to 56 years. They were interviewed individually in their communities by the first author who has been known to them for many years. A narrative inquiry approach provided the framework for this research (Liamputtong, 2013: 118). We were conscious of the possible limitations this might imply. First, that people might not make critical comments, given their familiarity with the interviewer, and second that they might provide overly positive responses. While we were aware of these concerns, we saw the advantages in the long-lasting relationship, trust and rapport all workers have with the interviewer (Liamputtong, 2013: 317), which ensured their willingness to be interviewed and created a relaxed atmosphere during the conversations. Their responses were written down during interviews, giving respondents time to think and rethink their answers, allowing them to break eye contact and easing the pressure for an immediate reply. Interviews were then transcribed, and key themes and issues were identified and explored further.

A group of Indigenous elders with longstanding experience in early childhood services and education on the Tiwi Islands was consulted throughout this project. These include Indigenous teachers and school leaders, childcare managers and cultural leaders. They provided advice on a range of issues including children's needs at school, family issues, engagement of parents by the LIOs and both-ways learning.

## **Listening to LIOs**

Three main themes emerged from analysis of the LIOs narratives and can be summarised as follows: relationships matter, the development of reciprocity and reflective practice. These show how relationships with colleagues shaped the LIOs' experience and their practice.

### *Relationships matter: 'Trust and respect both ways'*

There was great consistency in the reports from the LIOs that trust and respect were the attributes they valued most in their contact with Darwin-based colleagues:

Trust and respect both ways, friendship. If you can't trust, you should not work together.

It depends on who is coming out. It's got to be an understanding between the person who comes and us. [It is] A matter of trust and respect. We are there to protect each other.

Social relationships have been associated with a number of positive outcomes, including happiness, less stress and a higher quality of life (Chadsey and Beyer, 2001) as well as overall health (McEwan et al., 2010). Bolton and Bolton (1996: 6) highlight the ability to relate effectively to people as of 'prime importance in nearly every position in the workplace'. Effective working relationships and successful collaboration are characterised by mutual trust, and respect ongoing communication, and attention to all parties' needs and expertise (Kirkham, 2014). Trustful relationships are not achieved overnight and require 'shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members' (Lencioni, 2002: 197). It takes time and thoughtfulness to create a safe environment in which LIOs and the fly-in team members feel comfortable to talk about challenges in work as well as sensitive and personal issues. We have experienced that the mutual sharing of life stories, issues and problems is one element that has helped to build that

trust, to bridge the ‘us’ and ‘them’ gap. Fly-in staff need to be prepared to share more about themselves than they might in another work setting and to take time to develop trusting relationships with their colleagues. As one LIO said,

Make each other understand each other, talk.

The LIOs highlighted the importance of knowing about each other’s lives and asked for more time for this. They valued that each member of the team shared some of their story, about where they came from and their family. This allowed mutual interest, concern and kindness, and encouraged empathy and understanding between members of the team:

Should talk more after everyone is gone [after the program], about ourselves.

Share my feelings. More time to talk about me, my problems, my feelings, what I want to do with my kids, my own issues. That’s important.

The LIOs appreciated the professional expertise of their colleagues without seeing them as remote from their daily lives. They highly valued the way in which their colleagues stayed alongside them in their job and in life, while demonstrating the skills and knowledge associated with delivering effective family and community interventions.

What became increasingly apparent was the degree to which relationships with work colleagues was important for the LIOs. They highlighted ‘friendship’ as a key positive element and valued qualities associated with empathy, respect and listening. LIOs described this in the following way:

I really love everything with Menzies’ mob, every one of them, wonderful people, like friends ...

Happy. Fun, nice people to work with, friendly.

Talk to each other, spend time together, sometimes we have funny stories. When we talk, we laugh together.

Friendships are described as ‘voluntary and reciprocal’ relationships which enhance people’s lives (Morrison, 2004). Morrison cites empirical studies highlighting the positive aspects of workplace friendships. These social relations offer significant benefits for some individuals and can provide increased communication, cooperation, growth, respect and trust, which can positively influence work-related attitudes and behaviour. Chadsey and Beyer (2001) distinguish work-related interactions, such as requesting assistance and sharing work information, from non-work-related interactions, such as teasing and joking and talking about personal issues. Both work- and non-work-related interactions are described as important for establishing social relationships at work. One LIO said,

Sit together and talk, respect each other, look after each other, trust each other ...

### *The development of reciprocity: ‘We have to learn and understand each other’*

A key element in establishing relationships and working together in a ‘good way’ is a commitment to shared and mutual learning, also described as both-ways or two-way learning (McGuinness and Leckning, 2013). The fly-in team relies on the LIOs to provide them with a culturally informed perspective on basic assumptions about childrearing and family life, on



culture and relationships and meaning, and also about ways of doing things and working together. Fly-in team members contribute knowledge based on their training and experience. This sharing of perspectives enables situations to be looked at in different ways and supports collaborative work to develop a culturally respectful and inclusive service. Browne et al. (2013) describe that this worked most effectively ‘when there was an equal partnership where both parties were comfortable in their roles as both teacher and learner’. Working in a partnership, where their expertise was respected and sought, LIOs described it as important to teach their skills to the fly-in team members:

You have to learn our way, our culture.

We have to learn and understand each other.

Culture, who can speak and not. When it is appropriate [pause], communication between you and us all the time, so you get information what to do, [pause] or you can’t do program.

Relationship-based practice incorporates and values the uniqueness of each individual’s circumstances and the diverse sources of knowledge. There are obstacles to both-ways learning, which cannot be forgotten. Clay and Olitt (2012) identify the ‘I know best’ (p. 23) trap as an obstacle to effective teamwork, while Ober (2009) points out,

We know it is easy to talk about both-ways philosophy, but to actually put it into practice is another story. There is a power struggle, there is misunderstanding and misinterpretation, however this needs to be worked through until a negotiation is reached between key players. (p. 36)

To overcome this, LS team members use a collaborative process that draws on individual strengths and assets. This strength-based approach recognises the importance of people’s environments and the multiple contexts that influence their lives (Saint-Jacques et al., 2009) and focuses on the potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities of individuals, rather than on their limitations (Grant and Cadell, 2009). This approach is more likely to encourage effective learning environments and attitudes. Applying this to practice requires recognition of each member’s talents, strengths and expertise, allowing people to take on the roles and responsibilities they feel comfortable with and are equipped for, as well as supporting development of new skills. Fly-in workers need to recognise the limitations of their professional expertise in this unique context, to be ready to learn from their local colleagues and to adapt their behaviour accordingly. The importance of this approach is described by the LIOs:

People from outside know about the program. We know more about kids and families on the ground. Communication link up. It helps to learn from each other.

We are both equally important, help each other.

Would have liked to learn about program and talk [about] what I can offer and what you can offer. Would like to know about history, what worked with the program, the people who have done it. Would like to know more about you mob, what you have done before and what you are good at.

Taking time for knowledge sharing, skill development and consolidation of relationships enables team members to incorporate new ideas and develop new understanding. It leads to stronger relationships and cooperation within the team. In addition to being good for members of the team, the overall aim is provision of a better, more accessible and relevant programme for participating families and communities.

*Reflective practice: ‘Share it with you mob, bring it out, can’t keep it to our self ...’*

Reflective practice is identified as central to successful intercultural partnerships (Laycock et al., 2009). To address the diversity of culture, language, knowledge, expertise and approaches to problem-solving within the team, a reflective element of the programme includes a regular ‘debrief’ and discussion after each week of programme delivery. This is an important element of ‘on-the-job learning’. The LS team meets after each session to compile notes about the week’s work. These meetings include documentation of attendance, issues that have arisen within or outside of the group and interactions between participating parents and children. LIOs play an important role in this debriefing; they often help clarify misunderstandings about the behaviour of parents and children, translate words or ideas and provide helpful background information, as well as contributing their own interpretations to consideration of issues for programme participants. LIOs describe this as follows:

I help, I learn myself, I listen, I observe parents, children and you mob. I don’t say anything before I think what is happening.

... like we learn from each other, too, and watching, sharing being supportive to each other ...

Learning for all of us, learning, respecting each other

Leadership is required to ensure that more than practical issues are considered and discussed. Issues close to their own experiences can come up for the LIOs working with LS. The LIOs work on the basis of commonalities of experience, but individualise this through personal stories and accounts (Mares and Robinson, 2012). Being involved in the work and with participating families through their own stories can be difficult at times. One LIO, for example, who did not have the support of her partner in the upbringing of her own children, said ‘but it is sad that dads don’t come, but sometimes they have lots to do [pause]. But most time they leave everything to the mums’. A challenge for programme leaders is to create a safe environment that allows the LIOs to feel comfortable to talk about what are sometimes sensitive and personal issues. The fly-in workers need to be vigilant and sensitive in dealing with this. Flexibility and cultural empathy are needed and there are times when people decide not to take part in a particular discussion. Time for review and reflection, even though time-consuming and difficult at times, was identified as important. ‘Talking after program is important, we really need to do that and talk about them. Part of the program.’

While the LIOs are proud of their special role in the team and their community, it can also put them under stress, particularly when negative events occur. They describe feeling ‘shame’, when families do not attend, are involved in ‘troublesome’ behaviour or there is community conflict:

Parents have to be here, when program is happening, I don’t like it when they don’t come. Get the feeling that some make excuses, don’t like that.

They should really come to the program [pause]. That makes it hard for us, too. Then we have to humbug them, but they need to be here for their children.

Role ambiguity and unclear cultural legitimacy (Harris and Robinson, 2007) as well as the recognition that local workers often face many of the same personal and family problems as the clients they serve can lead to ‘burnout’ or otherwise to withdrawal (Kirkham, 2014). The fly-in workers have a further opportunity for reflection during the flight and then supervision back in Darwin. Practical and financial issues make it difficult for the whole team (LIOs and fly-in staff) to



participate together in regular reflective supervision with an external supervisor. For this reason, it is the responsibility of the fly-in group leader to initiate discussion of any outstanding issues or concerns after the programme or in the following week and to manage what can sometimes be difficult conversations. Besides the weekly debrief and regular supervision, informal 'on the go' conversations between LIOs and the fly-in team are very important opportunities for listening to 'what lies between the lines' or sensing potential problems. Often body language or offhand comments have to be 'translated' so team members can make sure they have been understood and interpreted the correct way. This involves an active and consistent engagement with cultural, ethical and personal issues. Shared conversations provide encouragement, support and stimulation and inform work practice in positive ways. Providing time for reflection and conversation to improve the quality of interactions with each other and the delivery of the service is an essential element of working in a multicultural team:

Share it with you mob, bring it out, can't keep it to ourself. So feel fresh when we start work. When we talk about it, don't can't hold it inside.

## Managing team and personal relationships

We wondered whether the centrality of friendship to successful relationships between team members raised critical questions about professional boundaries. 'Being a friend' might be seen to undermine the notion of a professional working relationship. A consequence of establishing friendly relationships and the obligations which can go along with them could lead to blurring of personal and professional boundaries. In practice, and during the interviews, it was clearly understood that this work friendship had limitations, and most of the time this was not overstepped. We would therefore argue that the discourse about friendship engaged by the LIOs is appropriate, as it highlights the factors important for establishing and maintaining meaningful work relationships. There is not a large body of literature about the impact of friendship on professional relationships and the context we are considering is unique. The literature about dual relationships for professional workers generally addresses concerns about boundary violations and power imbalance in relationships between professionals and clients, rather than between team members (Bennett and Zubrzycki, 2003). Drummond (2014) discusses the notion of a continuum of professional behaviour, highlighting the importance of appropriate professional boundaries, in a discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers. We suggest that the challenges of 'dual relationships' facing the LIOs working with the LS programme are equally applicable to Aboriginal staff employed in health or community service roles within their own, often small and remote communities.

Just as defining or evaluating cultural competence in non-local workers can be problematic (Kirmayer, 2012; Wendt and Gone, 2011), so this individualised and jointly constructed definition of roles and responsibilities for the LIOs can be a challenge for programme managers, the team and human resources staff. Competing obligations such as attending work or caring for family arise regularly for LIOs working with the LS team. Discussion about how to manage this at a practical but also an emotional level occurs frequently. Fly-in workers need to indicate their reliance on the local team and the importance of knowing when other family or community events are likely to take priority and impact on programme delivery.

Many practical obstacles such as weather, transport, family and cultural issues, poor accessibility and funding affect the work of a multicultural team in remote communities (Mares and Robinson, 2012). For these reasons, relationships with the LIOs have to be nurtured if they are to be sustained. A key element is staying in regular contact. During periods when the programme

was being delivered elsewhere, it was appreciated that contact with the LIOs was maintained through phone calls and occasional visits. The opportunity to talk to or see each other and to touch base regarding work-related and personal issues was crucial to keeping everyone engaged. In recent years, most LIOs have become active users of social media, in particular Facebook which has become an instant, affordable form of communication enabling team members to stay in contact and exchange information. The project-based, time-limited nature of programme funding and employment contracts, common to many projects delivered in remote Aboriginal communities, impacts on staff continuity, forward planning and programme delivery and can undermine these important relationships. LIOs expressed their wish for more working hours and predictable and continuous employment:

I would like to work every day. Keeps me busy. I like it this way.

I dream of working every day. Monday to Friday, [name of youngest child] would be with me and the others are at school.

Would love to have permanent position.

## Discussion

While there is some literature on relationships with Aboriginal health workers (Stamp et al., 2008), there is very little guidance about factors that support the development of successful working relationships within a multicultural team in remote communities, and in particular between local Aboriginal workers and fly-in workers from outside the community. This may indicate poor recognition of the importance and complexity of these relationships to effective programme delivery.

This evaluation used the voices of six LIOs to analyse how they relate to and work with fly-in colleagues, the challenges and strengths associated with multicultural teamwork and the qualities of successful working partnerships. It is significant that all LIOs interviewed greatly valued working with LS. Their responses highlight the importance of establishing working relationships that are based on trust and friendship, combined with professional support. The LIOs identified their employment as positive in many ways, and there is empirical evidence that relationships in the workplace are an antecedent of job satisfaction (Morrison, 2004). The successful working partnerships that are central to delivery of LS are based on reciprocity, empowerment and respect where practice (programme engagement and delivery) is produced and thought about (reflection) together. These partnerships take considerable investment and need to be strength-based. Fly-in workers need to acknowledge their reliance on the LIOs and their expertise. They need to share aspects of their own lives and be consistent in contact with and in their support for local colleagues. LIOs greatly value the informality ('friendship') of their relationships with their fly-in colleagues, as well as the positive 'professional' quality and skills they can offer. Fly-in team members were seen as 'ordinary' people with whom things could be talked through, rather than as people with all the answers. Effective bicultural teamwork requires a respectful exchange of different but equally valuable knowledge, skills and experiences. Positive relationships are central to the success of a multicultural team.

These observations highlight the need to support the development and recognition of the LIOs and their central role in service delivery to families in remote Aboriginal communities. Role ambiguity is common, and the diversity and at times severity of environments and personal situations for some LIOs negates a one-size-fits-all approach to their involvement. Flexible training and employment strategies are needed to support local workers and facilitate both-ways practice. In addition, the effort required to support both-ways relationships needs to be recognised and funded to facilitate retention, training, employment and potential accreditation of Aboriginal staff in their

communities and to build capacity and programme sustainability. Partnerships such as those described enable early intervention and parenting programmes such as LS to be effectively implemented in remote communities, a key step in achieving meaningful outcomes.

LS is not only a parenting programme. It includes elements of community development and relies on and supports local workers in their personal and professional development. A programme which aims to support Aboriginal parents and children should be judged on its effectiveness in relation to the participating families and also on the level to which local community members benefit from the programme through employment and other externalities.

## Outcomes and conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify promising elements of best practice relevant to working together to deliver an early childhood intervention programme in remote Aboriginal communities in northern Australia, with a team including local Aboriginal workers and fly-in staff.

We have understood that

- building respectful and trusting relationships within the team is a high priority if a project is to be successful;
- building strong and effective relationships takes time but is worth the effort;
- the relationships between LIOs and ‘fly-in’ workers are reciprocal but not symmetrical in terms of what is learnt and provided;
- these relationships bring cultural and professional expertise to programme delivery;
- programme and project planning needs to include sufficient time to build and sustain these relationships;
- developing mutual both-ways mentoring relationships within the team is the best way to share knowledge;
- a sense of each team member’s strengths and needs allows expectations and responsibilities to be clarified;
- time and resources are needed to support reflection on practice and to improve the quality of service delivery to families and interactions within the team; this not only increases the pedagogical knowledge of team members but also links new learning to practice.

The promising examples described in this article provide hope that increased involvement of local Aboriginal staff in family- and community-based programmes can lead to more effective community and family engagement and positive outcomes. Programme delivery is dependent on the expertise of the local workers and their relationships with fly-in staff. The development of trusting and respectful relationships between local and fly-in workers builds capacities of all team members and empowers LIOs, fly-in workers as well as parents. It can be challenging to work in a team of people with very different cultural, social and language backgrounds, values, skills and knowledge, but barriers can be opportunities in disguise. By acknowledging each other’s strengths and working together to build trusting relationships, every member of the team has the opportunity to expand their understanding and abilities through strong relationships with the people they work with and learn from.

## Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the work of their colleagues within the LS team at the Menzies School of Health Research. Let’s Start has benefited from the input of many elders, parents and grandparents in the development and refinement of the program over many years. For this study, we would like to acknowledge Patrick Puruntatameri, Danny Munkara, Roger Tipungwuti, Theresita Puruntatameri and Barry Puruntatameri. Particular thanks go to the LIOs from Wurrumiyanga, Milikapiti and Pirlangimpi.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) 'Tiwi Islands'. Available online at: [http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/IARE704006?opendocument&navpos=2202011](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/IARE704006?opendocument&navpos=2202011)
- Australian Medical Association (2013) 'The Health Early Years – Getting the Right Start in Life', 2012–13 AMA Indigenous Health Report. Available online at: [https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/AMA\\_Indigenous\\_Health\\_Report\\_Card\\_2012\\_2013.pdf](https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/AMA_Indigenous_Health_Report_Card_2012_2013.pdf)
- Bennett, B. and J. Zubrzycki (2003) 'Hearing the Stories of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Workers: Challenging and Educating the System', *Australian Social Work* 56(1): 61–70.
- Bennett, B., J. Zubrzycki and V. Bacon (2011) 'What Do We Know? The Experiences of Social Workers Working Alongside Aboriginal People', *Australian Social Work* 64(1): 20–37.
- Billett, S. (1993) 'What Is in a Setting? Learning in the Workplace', *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education* 33(1): 4–14.
- Bo, B.P. (2015) 'Social Work in a Multicultural Society: New Challenges and Needs for Competence', *International Social Work* 58(4): 562–74.
- Bolton, R. and D.G. Bolton (1996) *People Styles at Work: Making Bad Relationships Good and Good Relationships Better*. New York: Amacon.
- Browne, J., S. Thorpe, N. Tunny, K. Adams and C. Palermo (2013) 'A Qualitative Evaluation of a Mentoring Program for Aboriginal Health Workers and Allied Health Professionals', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 37(5): 457–62.
- Chadsey, J. and S. Beyer (2001) 'Social Relationships in the Workplace', *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Review* 7(2): 128–33.
- Clay, C. and R. Olitt (2012) *Peer Power: Transforming Workplace Relationships*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cox, E. (2005) 'Adult Learners Learning from Experience: Using a Reflective Practice Model to Support Work-Based Learning', *Reflective Practice* 6(4): 459–72.
- Drummond, A. (2014) 'Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners', in O. Best and B. Fredericks (eds) *Yatdjuligin: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery Care*, pp. 163–88. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeth, D. (2001) 'Sustaining Interprofessional Collaboration', *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 15(1): 37–46.
- Grace, R. and M. Trudgett (2012) 'It's Not Rocket Science: The Perspectives of Indigenous Early Childhood Workers on Supporting the Engagement of Indigenous Families in Early Childhood Settings', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 37(2): 10–18.
- Grant, J. and S. Cadell (2009) 'Power, Pathological Worldviews, and the Strength Perspective in Social Work', Social Work Faculty Publications Paper 7. Available online at: [http://scholars.wlu.ca/scwk\\_faculty/7/](http://scholars.wlu.ca/scwk_faculty/7/)
- Harris, A. and G. Robinson (2007) 'The Aboriginal Mental Health Worker Program: The Challenge of Supporting Aboriginal Involvement in Mental Health Care in the Remote Community Context', *Australian e-journal for the Advancement of Mental Health* 6(1): 15–25.
- Holland, C., P. Dudgeon and H. Milroy (2013) 'The Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Families and Communities', Supplementary Paper to a Contributing Life: The 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention for the National Mental Health Commission. Available online at: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/media/57850/ATSI%20SUPPLEMENTARY%20PAPER.pdf>
- Horner, N. (2012) *What Is Social Work?* London: SAGE.
- Hunt, J. (2013) 'Engaging with Indigenous Australia – Exploring the Conditions for Effective Relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities', Issues paper no. 5. Produced for the Closing

- the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne; Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available online at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2013/ctgc-ip5.pdf>
- Kirkham, R. (2014) *Obligation and compromise: Aboriginal maternal infant health workers successes, challenges and partnerships* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Adelaide, SA, Australia: The University of Adelaide.
- Kirmayer, L. (2012) 'Rethinking Cultural Competence', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 49(2): 149.
- Kuipers, P., D. Harvey, M. Lindeman and K. Stothers (2014) 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners in Rural Areas: Credentialing, Context and Capacity Building', *Rural and Remote Health* 14: 2897. Available online at: <http://www.rrh.org.au/Articles/subviewnew.asp?ArticleID=2897>
- Laycock, A., D. Walker, N. Harrison and J. Brands (2009) *Supporting Indigenous Researchers: A Practical Guide for Supervisors*. Joondalup, WA: Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Edith Cowan University.
- Lencioni, P. (2002) *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Brass.
- Liamputtong, P. (2013) *Qualitative Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lymbery, M. and A. Millward (2009) 'Partnership Working', in R. Adams, L. Dominelli and M. Payne (eds) *Practising Social Work in a Complex World*, pp. 167–78. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McEwan, A., K. Tsey, J. McCalman and H. Travers (2010) 'Empowerment and Change Management in Aboriginal Organisations: A Case Study', *Australian Health Review* 34: 360–7.
- McGuinness, K. and B. Leckning (2013) *Bicultural Practice in the Northern Territory Children and Family Sector: Practitioners' Reflections of Working Two-Ways*. Casuarina, NT: Menzies School of Health Research.
- Mares, S. and G. Robinson (2012) 'Culture, Context and Therapeutic Process: Delivering a Parent–Child Intervention in a Remote Aboriginal Community', *Australasian Psychiatry* 20(2): 102–7.
- Morley, C. (2007) 'Engaging Practitioners with Critical Reflection: Issues and Dilemmas', *Reflective Practice* 8(1): 61–74.
- Morrison, R. (2004) 'Informal Relationships in the Workplace: Associations with Job Satisfaction, Organisational Commitment and Turnover Intentions', *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 33(3): 114–28.
- Ober, R. (2009) 'Both-Ways: Learning from Yesterday, Celebrating Today, Strengthening Tomorrow', *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 38: 34–9.
- Robinson, G., S. Mares, Y. Jones, C. Stock, B. Hallenstein and V. Branchut (2012) *The Let's Start Parent Child Program: Information Paper*. Darwin: Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research.
- Robinson, G., S.R. Zubrick, S. Silburn, W. Tyler, Y. Jones, A. D'Aprano, K. McGuinness, C. Cubillo, M. Bell and C. Stock (2009) 'Let's Start: Exploring Together. An Early Intervention Program for Northern Territory Children and Families', Final evaluation report, School for Social and Policy Research, Institute of Advanced Studies, Charles Darwin University, Casuarina, NT, Australia.
- Saint-Jacques, M.C., D. Turcotte and E. Pouliot (2009) 'Adopting a Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice with Families in Difficulty: From Theory to Practice', *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 90(4): 454–61.
- Stamp, G.E., S. Champion, G. Anderson, B. Warren, D. Stuart-Butler, J. Doolan, C. Boles, L. Callaghan, A. Foale and C. Muyambi (2008) 'Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Care Workers: Partners in Caring for Aboriginal Mothers and Babies', *Rural and Remote Health* 8(883): 6–8.
- Stock, C., S. Mares and G. Robinson (2012) 'Telling and Retelling Stories: The Use of Narrative and Expressive Approaches in a Group Intervention with Parents and Children in a Remote Aboriginal Community', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 33(2): 157–70.
- Wendt, D.C. and J.P. Gone (2011) 'Rethinking Cultural Competence: Insights from Indigenous Community Treatment Settings', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 49(2): 206–22.
- Young, S., J. Zubrzycki, S. Green, V. Jones, K. Stratton and D. Bessarab (2013) "'Getting It Right: Creating Partnerships for Change": Developing a Framework for Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Knowledges in Australian Social Work Education', *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 22(3–4): 179–97.

Zubrzycki, J., S. Green, V. Jones, K. Stratton, S. Young and D. Bessarab (2014) *Getting It Right: Creating Partnerships for Change. Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in Social Work Education and Practice. Teaching and Learning Framework*. Sydney, NSW, Australia: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Zufferey, C. (2012) "'Not Knowing that I Do Not Know and Not Wanting to Know": Reflections of a White Australian Social Worker', *International Social Work* 56(5): 659–73.

### **Author biographies**

**Carolin Stock** obtained her Masters in Social Work at the University for Applied Science in Munich, Germany, where she went on to lead a therapeutic group program for children with mental health issues. Since 2008 she has been part of the Indigenous parenting and family research within the Centre for Child Development and Education at Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, Australia. Her focus is on program delivery in remote Aboriginal communities, training local Aboriginal staff and action research.

**Sarah Mares** is an infant, child and family psychiatrist now based in Sydney Australia. She worked with the Let's Start program between 2010 and 2013 and has an established clinical and academic interest in prevention and early intervention to support better outcomes for infants and children.

**Gary Robinson** is an anthropologist who has worked with Aboriginal families, children and youth in remote Northern Australia over thirty years. He is Professor of Indigenous parenting and family research at the Centre for Child Development and Education, and has lead the implementation of the Let's Start program since 2006.