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Department of Families, Community Services
and Indigenous Affairs

Occasional Paper No 17

Growing up in the Torres Strait region: A report from the Footprints in Time trials

Cooperative Research
Centre for Aboriginal Health
in collaboration with the
Telethon Institute for Child
Health Research and the
Department of Families,
Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs



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footprints in time
The Longitudinal Study of
Indigenous Children



This report may contain information or photos that may offend some readers

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The stories contained in this report belong to the residents and participants of the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area. These stories should not be copied in any way or quoted without prior written approval.

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1 Background and demographics

1.1 Introduction

The following report documents the growing up stories provided by people in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area during the trial phase of the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children. The trial is designed to assist the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) develop a national ‘Footprints in Time’ Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children.

About ‘Footprints in Time’

What is ‘Footprints in Time’?

‘Footprints in Time’ is the name FaCSIA has given to the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children. The study will work in partnership with a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families all over the country, to collect information on the things that impact on Indigenous children’s lives, and the things that help them to grow up strong.

There will be two groups of children in the study—babies under one year, and children aged 4 to 5 years. ‘Longitudinal’ means the study will go back to these same children over a long period of time to see how they develop and grow. To get the big picture, families and carers of Indigenous children living in remote and very remote areas, in regional (country) areas, and in urban (city) areas will be asked to participate.

How did ‘Footprints in Time’ start?

Research from other countries has shown that the early years of a child’s life build the foundations for their future health and wellbeing. This shows that early intervention—giving children the support they need to grow up strong—can make a real difference for their future.

In 2003, FaCSIA decided to fund a study of Indigenous children to provide information on what children need to grow up strong. FaCSIA consulted with Indigenous communities around the country, and from this came the plan for the ‘Footprints in Time’ study. FaCSIA is also funding another large study of young children—The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children—that includes a small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in urban and regional areas.

How will the ‘Footprints in Time’ information be used?

► Communities

Communities will be able to use the information to help make decisions on the services and resources they need, to support funding applications for these services, and to manage these services.

► Governments

Federal, state/territory and local governments will be able to use the information to plan better, more coordinated services for Indigenous children and their families.

■ Service providers

Health centres and child care, preschool, and sports and education services will be able to use this information to make sure the Indigenous children they work with get the best possible outcomes.

It is also hoped that this study can show governments and service providers the difference in Indigenous cultures compared to other cultures, and how important it is to acknowledge, respect and include these differences in their planning, policy and services.

How is 'Footprints in Time' different to other surveys or research projects?

This is the first time a study like this with Indigenous families has been done across Australia. Because 'Footprints in Time' is a longitudinal study, FaCSIA will be maintaining contact with the children, their families and communities over a long period of time. This means it is important that FaCSIA builds a relationship and works in partnership with the children's communities, so we can keep as many children in the study as we can, for as long as we can. The study may employ local Indigenous Community Liaison Officers to collect the data and help maintain relationships with the communities.

FaCSIA is also working with communities to work out how to collect the information, and how the information will be presented and used. The study's Steering Committee and Design Sub-committee is mostly made up of Indigenous leaders and researchers, and this also gives FaCSIA guidance in planning the study.



The research teams in training on Thursday Island, May 2005

About the trials in the Torres Strait Islands and Northern Peninsula Area regions

What were the trials for?

The 'Footprints in Time' study can only be a success through gaining the support of the community and the participation of the families in the study, and by maintaining their involvement over time. To give the national study the best chance of success, communities and families need to be approached in the best possible way. So before starting the national 'Footprints in Time' study, we (FaCSIA) needed to make sure we were making those important first steps in the right direction.

The Torres Strait Islands and Northern Peninsula Area regions were chosen as areas to conduct the trials because they are diverse in language, culture and services, and because it would help us learn about the transport, equipment and resource needs for research in remote areas. Trials were also conducted in the Australian Capital Territory metro/Queanbeyan region, where we learnt different things about working with communities in an urban (city) and regional (country town) setting.

How will the trials help the 'Footprints in Time' study?

When these trials are completed, we can sit down and look at how well we built a relationship with the communities in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area regions, and how well we collected the 'growing up stories'. The growing up stories will give us some more ideas about the sort of questions we should be asking in the 'Footprints in Time' national study.

FaCSIA will also learn from the trials about the best ways to:

- make contact with communities and families
- explain 'Footprints in Time' to people in the community
- develop research agreements with communities
- interview people and collect information
- put the stories together and report back to communities
- recruit, train and work with local Community Liaison Officers and researchers.

About this report

What is this report for?

For FaCSIA, this report is a record for use when designing the national 'Footprints in Time' study. Producing this report is also another part of our trial process—it helps us to learn about the best ways to put information together and bring it back to communities.

For the communities in both the Torres Strait and the Northern Peninsula Area, this report will be a record of growing up in the region—in the past and in the present. The interviews with people of various ages in the community gave a picture of how childhood and parenting has changed over time—which can help communities remember the past while planning for the future.

Where to from here?

We will be looking at all the feedback we get from the interview participants, community representatives, our Community Liaison Officers, researchers and others involved in the trials about how well we engaged with the community, how we collected the growing up stories, and how we reported back to the communities. We will be asking ourselves:

- What did we do well?
- What could we have done better, or differently?
- How will we do this work on a national scale?

1.2 Demography of the Torres Strait Islands and Northern Peninsula Area regions

The Torres Strait Islands are located between the Cape York Peninsula on the Australian mainland and Papua New Guinea. The region is spread over a geographic area of 48,000 square kilometres incorporating more than 100 islands, of which 17 are inhabited.

The northern islands of Boigu, Dauan and Saibai are within five kilometres of the Papua New Guinea mainland. The Torres Strait Treaty signed by Australia and Papua New Guinea in 1985 allows people from Papua New Guinea, and Torres Strait Islanders to cross the Australian-Papua New Guinean international border for traditional visits, including for trade and family visits.

The Torres Strait region includes 20 communities and is divided into six regions or clusters. These are Kalakawal (top western islands), Meriam (eastern islands), Kulkalgal (central islands), Kalalagal (near western islands), Kaiwalagal (inner islands), and the Northern Peninsula Area on the Australian mainland.

The Kaurareg people, who are the traditional Aboriginal inhabitants of the tip of Cape York Peninsula and nearby islands, claim native title ownership to the southern islands and surrounding seas in the Torres Strait.



Population

There are approximately 6,800 Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait region and another 42,000 outside the region who reside mainly in Townsville and Cairns. Torres Strait Islanders make up approximately 73 per cent of the population of the Torres Strait region.

The Torres Strait Islander population has a greater proportion of young people than the total Australian population, with approximately 41 per cent of the population under the age of 15 years as compared to 22 per cent of the total Australian population (ABS 1999, p. 138). Within the Torres Strait region as included in the 2001 national census, there were 1,063 Indigenous children under the age of five, with 215 of these indicated as attending preschool. In addition to these numbers there is an average of about 170 children born each year, maintaining a steady birth rate of approximately 2.8 per cent in the region.

Torres Strait Islander customs, referred to as 'Ailan Kastom', combine strong elements of Christianity, as evidenced by the 'Coming of the Light' ceremonies, with traditional values associated with the authority of Elders and sea and market garden-based economies. Ailan Kastom forms a strong bond between the different island communities and between Torres Strait Islanders living in the region and on the mainland (ABS 1999, p. 138).

The Northern Peninsula Area is situated at the top of Cape York Peninsula and consists of Aboriginal communities—Injinoo, Umagico and New Mapoon—and two Torres Strait Islander communities—Bamaga and Seisia. The total population of the region is approximately 2,500.

Language¹

More than 75 per cent of Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait are reported to speak a language other than English at home (ABS 1999, p. 38). The four main languages spoken in the region include **Meriam Mir**—language of the eastern Torres Strait Islands; **Kala Kaiwau Ya**—language of the top western islands; Kala Lugaw Ya—language of the lower western islands; and **Torres Strait Creole**—the language commonly used by all Torres Strait Islanders.

Governance

The Torres Strait Regional Authority was established in 1994 to allow Torres Strait Islanders to manage their own affairs according to their own Ailan Kastom and to develop a stronger economic base for the region. The authority is made up of 20 representatives, consisting of: the 17 island council chairs; representatives of Horn and Prince of Wales Islands; and a representative for the Thursday Island communities of Port Kennedy, Tamwoy, Rosehill, Aplin, Waiben and Quarantine.

Each island community in the Torres Strait elects its own council, which meets monthly to run the local affairs of the community. The local councils are responsible for a wide range of local government functions such as road maintenance, construction of public housing, water and sewerage systems, airstrips, child care facilities, and the upkeep of parks and outdoor facilities. In addition they are responsible for employing island police, administering island courts and controlling entry onto land granted in trust to Torres Strait Islanders (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1997, p. 19). Councillors are elected for a three-year term. The chairperson of each council is a member of the Island Coordinating Council, which meets to discuss regional issues.



The Island Coordinating Council is the peak Queensland organisation to represent the island councils. The council's membership consists of all the island council chairs and one person representing the Tamwoy community of Torres Strait Islanders living on Thursday Island.

The Northern Peninsula Area communities of Injinoo, Umagico and New Mapoon are managed under a special form of title called a Deed of Grant in Trust. Incorporated Aboriginal councils, which elect representatives every three years, manage the communities' affairs.

2 Overview of findings

This survey began by looking at the fundamental question of what is needed for children in the Torres Strait Islands and/or Northern Peninsula Area regions to grow up strong and healthy. From the first focus groups and interviews, it became very apparent that the children in these tight-knit communities have one very strong advantage—communities that share the responsibility for raising children and are committed to improving outcomes for their young people.

Community Elders, leaders, parents and service providers gave valuable insights into their own family life, their personal parenting experiences and their hopes and concerns for the children in their community.

While there was considerable diversity of experiences between the communities, some common themes emerged.

2.1 Role of extended family

The first is the shared responsibility for the raising of children on the islands. While parents retain a major role in the teaching of values and culture, extended family members, particularly uncles and aunties, also hold this responsibility. The definition of family is very broad, and generally extends well beyond blood relations to include close friends and respected community members. The effect of this is that the children have a number of people watching over their growth and development who help to teach them life skills, and endeavour to keep them on track. Young people have mixed reactions to the extended family role—they see it as a positive that they have the support of a number of people but also as a negative in that they cannot escape community scrutiny.



2.2 Traditional culture and language

Another very strong theme is the importance that the communities place on traditional culture to give their children a solid identity and to build their self-esteem. Many participants expressed views about the need to increase the teaching of culture and language within schools, as well as through community activities. The reintroduction of some traditional practices, particularly to do with food gathering and gardening, is seen as a way to link children to their culture and also overcome some real problems in terms of the availability of fresh food supplies. On many of the islands, Elders are actively involved in teaching children their culture. Children who are more grounded in their culture are seen as being less likely to be affected by negative influences. There are concerns about the impact of western culture and how young people are adopting American youth identities gleaned from television and popular culture.

The retention of language and culture appears strongest in the most northern communities, and it appears to be less prevalent in the islands closer to the mainland.



2.3 Education

Participants generally place a high value on formal education for their children and directly link it to their future career prospects. There are concerns on some islands about the quality of education available to their children due to staff inexperience and limited resources. A key issue in education is language. Most children are taught in English while, for many of them, English is their second language. There are also difficulties with school books and resources that do not reflect life in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area regions.

However, there are concerns regarding the increasing numbers of children not attending school. Even if children did attend school on a regular basis, some of the most significant problems raised stem from the lack of secondary education options. Many children are sent away to boarding school, disconnecting them from their family and culture. There are many stories of children ‘running wild’ while away, and of the problems they have readjusting to island life on their return. Many participants hold the view that many of the alcohol and drug problems in the communities stem from children being sent away without adequate supervision. Parents are also frustrated that even if a child receives good results, their career options are very limited within their own communities. However, there are also stories from people who valued their time at boarding school and credit it with opening up many opportunities for them.

2.4 Nutrition

Survey participants appear to be very aware that children need good nutrition for their health. In a number of communities, parents reported shortages of fresh food and are concerned that much of what was available for purchase had already spoiled or was past its expiry date. Fresh food is also comparatively expensive to buy. The lack of good food is attributed to a number of factors—the decline in traditional food gathering, the transport difficulties in getting food onto the islands, and control of the local stores.

2.5 Services

The remote location of many of the islands, combined with their small populations, means that even essential services such as power and water are at times restricted. Transport between the islands and to major centres is identified as a major issue due to infrequent schedules and cost. Some interviewees described children undertaking treacherous journeys by dinghy to attend cultural or sporting activities.

Health care is another major concern for parents. Most islands have a registered nurse, but limited visits from doctors. Many people have to travel to major centres, at their own expense, for medical care. Parents want more medical checks of their children and some continuity of care. Access to dental care is even more limited. Pregnant women have to travel to Thursday Island and at times to Cairns to give birth, which causes great hardship for their families, particularly when other children are left behind on the island.

Sporting and recreational facilities are high priorities for most communities, who see sport and recreation as a positive way to reduce boredom and give young people something to do.

2.6 Social issues

Many participants view drug and alcohol abuse as significant problems in their community. A number of people are worried about the impact this abuse has on the care of children. Some called for restrictions to the operating hours for the local canteens and more powers for community police.

There is also concern about the lack of work opportunities for young people. People are concerned about the lack of meaningful and long-term employment opportunities, reporting that Community Development Employment Program projects are often the only option for many people.

A decline in discipline and the respect given by young people to other community members were key concerns of a number of participants, particularly in focus groups. Many blame the erosion of traditional cultural practices for the decline.

2.7 Island life

There are many advantages to living on the islands. Young people in some locations speak about how they value their relative freedom and recreational activities like swimming, fishing, boating and walking on the reef. They also acknowledge the support they receive from living in a close-knit community, the benefits of extended family, and they are proud of their cultural activities.



The interviews and focus groups have given an important snapshot of life in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area regions for children. Participants identified a number of factors that they see as important in raising their children. They also spoke of the numerous challenges that they face in trying to improve the health and wellbeing of their children. The issues are not the same in every community. However, a comparison between the communities will provide valuable insight into ways to achieve better outcomes for Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area children and their families.

3 Cluster reports²

3.1 Kalakawal (top western islands)



Boigu

Boigu has a population of approximately 340 people. The island formed from alluvial mud deposited on decayed coral platforms by neighbouring Papua New Guinea's large river systems. The island is low-lying and sparsely vegetated except for mangrove swamps, and it is subject to flooding.



Dauan

Dauan is a small granite island close to the Papua New Guinea border, with a population of around 170 people. It is the most northern 'mountain' of Australia's Great Dividing Range, which in the Torres Strait becomes a sunken chain of islands that once extended as a bridge to the northern landmass. The town has developed along a narrow coastal strip backed by steep hills.



Saibai

Saibai is one of the largest Torres Strait Islands. It is 20 kilometres long by six kilometres wide, with a population of around 380 people. Papua New Guinea is only five kilometres to the north of Saibai. The island formed from alluvial sediment from Papua New Guinea's vast river systems. At an average of one metre above sea level, the island is a mixture of mangrove fringe, flood plain and brackish swamps. Saibai has strong links with the Bamaga community on Cape York, as many Saibai people migrated there following floods in the 1950s.



Overview of findings

This section looks at daily life on the islands of Boigu, Dauan and Saibai as an environment for raising children and keeping their culture and language strong. The life experiences of the inhabitants of these islands in times past or 'before time' are also highlighted and are integral to the understanding of the current issues.

A significant aspect of this group is their adherence to traditional culture and language. Many of the interviews in this cluster were conducted in language. A strong extended family structure is wrapped around children, with aunties and uncles actively involved in the care and teaching of children. It is apparent that children are encouraged to be involved in traditional activities such as gardening and hunting, with community initiation of both boys and girls holding great importance. Elders expressed concern that young people's participation in cultural activities becomes compromised as the children grow older and move away to school.

The communities expressed a number of concerns for their children. A major issue is the sending of many children to boarding schools for secondary education. Parents and Elders are becoming increasingly worried about 'European' influences on their young people and how it impacts on their ability and willingness to observe their own culture and speak language on their return. They are also concerned about how to balance their traditional lifestyle with both the positive and negative aspects of western or European culture. Children and young people are influenced by television and other popular culture media.

There are limited training and work options for young people on the islands. A number of participants expressed concerns that Community Development Employment Program projects are the only work options for their children. People would like more meaningful, long-term jobs that would benefit and direct their children into a career path of their choice.

The remoteness of the islands is reflected in limited services. Parents worry about the quality of education and health care. The availability of fresh food is limited, except for what is grown locally or hunted. People reported that food is often near expiry when it arrives in the local store, or has actually expired or spoiled by the time it is purchased. The unreliable availability of fresh, nutritious food has a potentially negative impact on children's growth and wellbeing.



The influence of Christianity is very strong on the islands, and many participants cited both religion and involvement in sport and recreational activities as positive influences for young people. Many people reported that attendance at church-related activities and events build respect, self-confidence and discipline in the children and young people.

The maintenance of the family unit and the role of the extended family are considered to be of great importance to the wellbeing of their children and their community. Passing down history of their ancestors and events in 'times past' and the knowledge of heritage are also seen as integral to building strong children and the continuation of their culture.





My life

Elder, Saibai Island

'I love those things when I went with my parents anywhere inland, for fishing, hunting, dugong hunting, anywhere. But I never think when I was small that it would be wonderful for me when I grew up. I just enjoy what my parents are doing.

'We used to visit uncle's every day, whether day or night, and go fishing and gardening too. 'Cause uncles are the most important person. Like your parents, and your brothers, eldest brothers. I learned most things from my father and my eldest brother—things like night hunting with torch. Torch that coconut leaf. We used bundles of coconut leaves for turtles, for spearing turtles, night time. Spearing fish like garfish, crayfish. I learnt those things from my father and eldest brother.

'That outrigger canoe I built out in my backyard there—that is the beginning for, give idea for kids to build a transport like they used before—outrigger canoe. No motor, no outboard motors, like they used to build and travel every way. Every time, learn those kids to make spears—dugong spears and fish spears. I learn those kids straighten the bamboo, then pour oil on bamboo before you put those prongs in, metal prongs, tie up with twine or gut line. Learn those kids how to use square rulers, hammer to build up something, anything, shed or anything, table. The dugong and turtle spears are hard, very hard work to make.

'In my children's teenage time they used drugs, the only bad thing they used. Sometimes they get naughty but mostly bad thing is when drug comes in. Drug and alcohol is one, nowadays, but in our time there was nothing we used. Nothing, when we were teenagers we used nothing.

'I talk hard and then I something like, make them scarecrow, I will report you, my kids for police. I made scarecrow. All my sons—they were boys—sometime when drug and alcohol, they would start to fight each other. That's the time now I will talk hard; talk those boys from knuckling each other and I make them scarecrows, from that thing they stop.

'Same again always, give them advice like, what we as parents, you know young days time, what we do to try to control the kids to walk in our steps, our foot steps. Like those tracks we talk about, today now, try to come by to make those kids walk in your foot tracks.

'I want all my kids to be like me. We have lots of daughter. They marry, so we give our knowledge, the way of doing gardening anything, we learn those daughters too like our sons. Because sons they remain our property, and daughters are like a bird, she fly to another island. That's the way of life, word we use. Daughters is a bird, like dove, she fly from one island to another island. But that knowledge we share that knowledge with our daughters and sons.'

Themes

Theme 1: Starting out—the early years of life

Participants identified that the early years are an important time for children to be grounded in culture and family values. It is seen as the parents' role to instruct the children in the first instance (supported by aunts, uncles and grandparents), to teach the children basic life skills and how to live in both Torres Strait and western lifestyles.

'Father and mother are first teacher. Learn these children, to look after them, to make them, everything, that's the first teacher. Before you go to school.'

'Parents are the first teachers at home before you send your kids to preschool or primary; this is how parents teach their children at home, to do housework, how to do bedding, cooking and other home duties; that's how you should train your kids.'

'Starting from baby it is up to the mother to show the baby or to discipline the baby in what to eat and the baby's sleeping time. It is up to the parents to do that.'

'I think the overall thing is parents are the first teachers. They become a role model for the kids, they teach and discipline the kids in their own home. What ever parents do, kids are following their footsteps.'



Given the cultural importance of gardening and good food, nutrition is also a major issue. People made comments that while they have a preference to consume healthier food, the introduction of grocery stores has made it hard to reintroduce the cultural lifestyle as a main source of nutrition. 'Before time' gardening and gathering food was a daily event and children participated in both activities. With the change in lifestyle and intrusion of western influences, children tend to spend less time participating in these activities.

'Well I think for a healthy lifestyle, they need garden food, because nowadays we have a shop here and they're selling greasy food at the takeaway shop.'

'... there is no more food from the ground that we supply for our kids. So healthy food is, go back to our forefathers' time, they lived off garden foods and lived a healthy life. Ground food is healthy, fish, water, food out there in the sea, today that had gone and sickness has come up.'

'The kids growing up, the diet, the food ... like for instance that plant, if you leave it and not feed it, it won't grow up healthy, you need to fertilise it to be healthy.'

Many of the people interviewed stressed the importance of their own language being taught as a first language to their children, and the role it plays as a basis of their identity.

‘Culturally and traditionally, language, I think, is the other main thing we parents have to look at teaching our kids, our own mother tongue than to learn English ... to teach them our culture and traditions at the very start and gives them cultural identity.’

There is also awareness that while the islands are remote, they are not isolated from outside cultures. Children have access to television from a very early age.

‘Nowadays when kids grow up from age 1–5, they copy what is on TV, they learn things from TV shows, they copy the behaviours.’

My early years **Parent, Saibai Island**

‘Between the ages of, from birth ‘til about seven, I didn’t really have a childhood, because we moved around a lot. Maybe because my family was influenced by alcohol, like any other Indigenous family. We were put in homes and from there we went to foster homes, I think you call them. It was good so I lived in foster homes for about five years. Between two families, one, year in another, the last four in another. The thing I most like was being a part of a family, having to experience the family structure.’

‘We finally came up to the Torres Strait, my brothers had got here before me. It was a whole new environment. We came across in luggers. It was fantastic. I never been on, I never sailed on the ocean before, it was great!’

‘I guess that is when my learning first start and that was the most enjoyable. Experiencing the different environment, the people, just the general way of life. The learning of the, language, what not to say, who to address, who not to address, where to go, where not to go. My grandma mostly who look after, as she was the main carer at that time, my Dad was still working on the mainland. So I guess—to cut a long story short—the learning of the culture was the most enjoyable thing.’



Theme 2: Growing up—school years

The school years present some specific challenges for communities. While families are keen for their children to receive a high quality education, they are equally concerned about the ability or willingness of schools to incorporate the teaching of their traditions.

‘The kids up at the school should be taught the cultural way. Their identity. There should be more traditional education to the kids, that they can practise these things when they come to their age, they need the cultural knowledge and us teaching them, how to hunt, how to put the vegetables in the ground.’

‘To grow up a child that’s strong, you should go back to the Elders, the way they were, managing their every day to day life—their traditional life, their cultural every day to day life.’

‘Kids have to stay away from school sometimes, play games, go fishing, cultural activities, and religion.’

One problem area that has been clearly identified by the participants is that the children are taught in English, not their own languages. The grammatical structure of English is very different to that of their language, which results in translation difficulties that compromise learning.

‘Inside school now, our kids using Creole, which is second language, instead of using our own language; and teachers, they should learn to teach our kids the language, because they have the language barrier.’

‘It’s hard to translate, because English is the second or third language. It’s not the kids’ fault if they can’t understand because of language.’



A number of participants expressed specific concerns about their local school.

‘... should have changes and bring other teachers from other communities.’

‘So they need to be changes to go the other islands and communities, so our kids can get proper education. So kids can uphold self-confidence ...’

A major issue for parents is the impact on the community and children of sending children away to boarding school or for further training. Many parents believe that outside influences will affect their children’s future prospects and behaviour.

'If you're in your own community, your parents are there to look over you, and make sure you're on the right track, for both religion and culture. These things like drugs, marijuana, alcohol, and that's how you end up a drop-out from school.'

'If the child is away from home, he can always misbehave; train and teach the child from here.'

'If they go away for training, for job training, parents don't know what they do; they could be just mucking around down south.'

'We sending them out to the world themselves for schooling, to other people out there look after them.'

Sending children away for schooling also has an impact on their language and cultural ties.

'When I did actually come back for holidays, to actually speak my own language I found it a bit difficult because I was speaking English all the time. It took me a while to adjust and speak the language fluently, 'cause I was always around English speaking students, for the challenges being away from home.'

'They come back and you just have to look at their behaviour, coming back not respecting parents, and people in the community. So our teaching, not taught where they are, for our cultural way.'

Groups consistently reported on what they saw as a breakdown in discipline and respect among young people, and limitations on how parents could punish a child for bad behaviour. It was felt that this has had a major impact in the breakdown of the traditional respect for relationships, which have always been a fundamental structure in the community

'The child never listens, respects the parents, they always have their own mind, don't follow the law, when traditional law is in place.'

'Kids used to not be able to go in the shops, now can go anywhere they like, in and out of the shops. Train kids at home, learn the rules and go by the rules. Shouldn't let your kids go to the shop. No punishment rules have spoilt the children.'

'But today's kids it is hard to punish, you can't punish your own child because of the western law or you will end up going to court if you do so.'

A Saibai mother outlined her ground rules.

'A real big thing in my household is my kids are not allowed to swear; it's the number one rule in my house and they don't. Or come home after 6:30 pm. Answering back at me, my husband or my brother or his wife or anybody for that matter. Not sharing is a big naughty thing in my house.'

Alcohol and drug abuse were raised by a number of participants as a major social problem amongst young people.

'Problems like, I mean some young kids use drugs, they use drugs, from opposite neighbours.'

'I don't think any parents want their children to be drug addicts or alcoholics or living off the streets and coming back and working in the CDEP [Community Employment Development Program], I don't believe that is anybody's goal.'

'Sometimes they get naughty but mostly bad thing is when drug comes in.'



Sport and recreational activities are seen as key strengths of island life. Organised sports and cultural activities for young people have been found to deter them from alcohol and smoking. Participants reported that the activities not only benefit young people, but also the community as a whole.

‘When they come back for holidays, instead of them sitting around doing nothing, we get them to go out, like to the other side of the island. We get them to build shelters, teach them about different types of ways how to hunt and stuff like, survival skills ...’



‘On holiday time, we have organised sports and carnivals for the three islands [Saibai, Dauan and Boigu]. That’s a good side for young people.’

‘They need to toughen up for the games, so it’s a great way to deter them from sitting around the pub every afternoon and smoking—brings out their fitness level and they’re actually concentrating and they’re focused. One of the disadvantages is that we don’t have a sporting arena.’

‘I have actually taken my kids out, since we have the new recreational centre, taken my two girls out to play volleyball and basketball, to get them involved in sports. Maybe once in the middle of the week and once on the weekend, to keep them in line, to be fit and healthy and give them confidence in any sport they like to play. It builds their self-esteem up, gives them something to look forward to.’

Theme 3: Family role

Another key asset for children growing up on the islands is the support they receive from extended family. All respondents described family in very broad terms to include all members of the community.

‘Our kinship system, it’s not only parents’ job or biological parents’ jobs. It’s also, they also get contribution from uncles and aunts and grandparents of mother or parents of mother and parents of father. So it was pretty much shared, so no-one had a burden or hardship of bringing up kids.’

‘Well up here it is really good when you go through difficult time or hardships, you got all your families up here—your “rellies”, you can turn around to either of them and ask your parents, another brother and your sisters, so you can share your problems with them to ask if they can give a hand.’

The extended family of aunts and uncles share responsibility to teach children about their culture and values and traditional methods of hunting, planting, harvesting and preparing food. Aunts and uncles play a major role in teaching the boys and girls general life skills, particularly with regard to the onset of menses and manhood.

‘If it’s a girl to teach her to cook and housework duties and sometimes it is the aunt’s duty to teach her these things. As for the boys, it is the same; it is the uncle’s responsibility to teach him the values of the traditional culture.’

‘I like to learn my kids, like those sons, about what I learned from my parents.’

‘If it is a girl, her responsibility is to look after her. It is the aunt’s responsibility. Her aunt has to show her everything, how to take care of herself when she becomes a woman. It’s not a mother’s role to show her or teach her how to look after herself, before all the family knows (breaking the news). Same goes for the boy too, referring to their uncle to teach them traditions, starting from the first shaving.’

‘Birthday parties are often celebrated together regularly, church festivities, funerals, not that that is regularly. Often shopping, shopping is a really big family thing for us. Down south, also visiting down south too. Going up to neighbouring islands for other festivities.’



There is a culture of sharing between members of the extended family.

‘There, like a sharing is like important thing in life. In community, blood relation people, any blood relation, you know there are islands, everybody one people one blood, intermarry, intermarriage you can get help from any son or daughter, your uncles, your aunts. Anything, they give spare, something, when they pool anything like food. Like sharing of dugong, turtle, sharing of food, garden foods, even though like my daughters and uncles they married, they can spare me a couple of dollars. That’s important, that one, sharing, you know, community.’

‘The whole family comes, sort of around and helps share out the dugong, have a bit of a nibble before the family takes their share home.’

The family bonds also stretch beyond each individual island with strong social relationships between them, and a high level of intermarriage.

‘Our links between the three islands [Saibai, Dauan, Boigu] are so strong in power.’

My family Saibai Island

‘Dad always put the male boys, male children, after every dinner table. If we did something wrong, dad would strongly speak of things that shouldn’t be done. I mean especially bullying, consumption of alcohol, and the behaviours, the characters you form out there when under the influence of alcohol.’

‘He would also talk what is good things, in a good way, as you can’t just abuse it, do it in the right way, so Dad always would talk on both sides. So was Mum. I think that was a routine that they would talk to us. That became something regular things that Dad would briefly talk about what we are doing the next day, tomorrow or next tomorrow, what plans are in place and the work to be done in the garden or anywhere around the house. And a routine that Mum would come and say if you will come with me and collect firewood.’

‘This is my upbringing, I was told that father is the skipper of the boat—so mother and children are the crews and dinghies behind the boat. So father is the one, within the household. I mean traditionally, the father is the root and from father inherit down to the boys, the root of the family/clan/tribe whatever. Women are like Torres Strait pidgin fly from one side of the bank to the other side of the bank. This is the idiomatic term.’

‘If you live with uncle, they are the one being your parent. If you live with your aunty, she is the one. If you are with your parent, father is the one to teach them children customs/values, I mean also grandparents as well, and they are the master of the family, so they know better than even your parents.’



Theme 4: Cultural influences

Retention of language and traditional culture was identified as vital for building strong children and young people and for maintenance of a strong community. The three islands pride themselves on the retention of their culture and language, especially in comparison with other islands that are closer to the Australian mainland.

‘When you look at other communities they are not using their culture any more. But these three communities [Boigu, Saibai and Dauan] still have strong culture.

If we have lost our culture we have lost our identity. To gain cultural identity, we have to teach our children and their generation to come.’

‘Culture main thing we talk about in island. Traditional culture. Never take a culture from other island come in; what our ancestors used to do and our grandparents, our parents, we walk on same culture. I mean teach those kids, talk those kids on that line.’

‘Culture, you teach your children culture every day at home. It is a daily routine type thing. Your son goes off with the father with a spear, out on the boat. Even when we are all fishing together, he is constantly talking to his son, and I do the same thing with my daughter. When we’re out the back in the garden, she helps me plant casaba, those types of things. So it’s an every day thing, teaching the culture and history.’

Elders continue to play an important role in the maintenance and teaching of cultural traditions including cooking, dancing and hunting.

‘I think our Elders are the “cornerstone” of our culture. We can actually only build up on what they actually give us, what they actually teach us and what they actually talk us through with, and then we experience it first hand.’

‘That happens at feastings especially, at, like, first shave, or a birthday party or a 21st, where an Elder comes out and gives the facts of life and the culture, and why we are celebrating—the respect side, how it interacts with the culture, you know, putting it all together.’

‘Before time, the parents’ time, they usually have people to gather the garden food and it’s like a donation towards the feasting in the community, together with the Buruwa. But today because of no people interested, we put a selected envelope and have donation and doing shopping at the IBIS store for the feasting. That actual knowledge is passed down today. Even if we don’t have gardens we still do it and donate, for the feasting. That’s how they teach the young generation, their kids.’

Language is regularly cited by participants as an important factor in the retention of culture and individual cultural identity of each island.

‘One of the key things is language. Because, English is the third language here on Boigu.’

‘So our language is more important for us to understand our perspective or lifestyle, the community lifestyle.’

‘... because Saibai, Dauan and Boigu have different signals to other islands, a different culture.’

However, the groups are concerned that despite their efforts, traditional activities are suffering some erosion, particularly in the important area of food gathering and preparation, and that this is having a negative impact on the health of their communities.

‘Because we stop doing the things, like gardening, and then in the end we found out today we are getting not enough supplies on the boat like fruit and veggies; it has affected our health and environment. People nowadays rely on the shops and stores to buy food instead of gardens.’



‘The western way of life has influenced our community, we have all kinds of diseases like diabetes, end up getting amputation, and people don’t rely on garden food anymore. More or less we don’t know how many days old the fruit and veggies we get on the boat.’

There is also competition for the attention of young people from western culture.

‘But we need to uplift, build up, that’s what our youth believes in outside culture, western culture.’

‘Drugs, alcohol, before time there was no child abuse, but today because they pick these things up from television and movies, they want to play the roles of the television.’

In the interviews, the participants often expressed their strong Christian faith. Regular attendance at church is common and often expected, and appears to have been reconciled with traditional ways.

‘I guess one of the strong influences on a community level is religion, or strong influence towards the kids to be able to have the respect back to the community, Elders especially, and cultural values, and I guess talking about youths.’

‘It’s important, when I was a kid we had to go to church every day, we had a roll that we marked. If we missed two days, we would get two whips of the cane. I don’t do it to my kids now. I make sure my kids go to church when I go to church.’

‘If you look at all the people going to church every Sunday, so if you missed out for some reason on an excuse, on Sunday, Mum and Dad would growl you.’

Culture is viewed as the foundation for the wellbeing of young people in the island communities.

‘Just put them on the right track culturally and traditional, teach them cultural way. The way we do these things teaches the young people to stand strong.’





My religion **Parent, Boigu**

'I think religion, no matter how you see it or which church you go to—I think it's important that we have God in our lives. We teach our kids, we pass that information or that knowledge to our kids as well. It's important on Sunday. I always tell my kids to go to church and I play a major part in churches as well. I do a bit of singing in church services and I enjoy it.'

'For all the talents and the gifts that I've got, I like to thank the Almighty, I know everything comes from up above and I reckon that's why our religion should be exercised in the community, regardless of what denomination you actually come from. Because if you focus on denomination, then it will definitely bring barriers. If you say "I am from this church", automatically there is a wall there. So in that sense it is important, regardless of what denomination we come from, we actually work together for the betterment of the community and for the betterment of our kids.'



Theme 5: Role of services

The interviews drew out a number of areas where participants felt that services were inadequate, or where their provision would significantly improve the community.

The sport and recreational facilities are seen as a strong positive factor, alleviating boredom and helping to keep children out of trouble.

'That is where sports and rec. and justice groups can come in to keep the kids occupied. That is why today most Indigenous kids get incarcerated in the legal system. Justice groups in communities and sports and rec., they's a good thing for communities.'

Professional services to help reduce drug and alcohol abuse are seen as an area that needs addressing. As a parent on Boigu described:

'Alcohol and gambling in the community—it affect the kids. Sometimes they don't have lunches at school, whether it is down south or here. I think this needs to be dealt with on a professional level, maybe by family services, the right department to deal with the issues, but I think it is important to deal with it first, now rather than later. Because the problem will only get worse.'

There is concern about the lack of training and meaningful work opportunities. There are particular concerns that young people returning to the communities have no job opportunities or significant career paths for their future. An increase in training options for young people was identified as a way to reduce substance abuse. Reliance on the Community Employment Development Program (CDEP) was viewed with concern by a number of interviewees.

‘More training, get our kids trained after school, more resources for going out to all different places in the community, to keep kids away from alcohol and smoking.’

‘You know we can’t just sit on our backsides and rely on CDEP’s and stuff like that. CDEP is only there to kick start you, it’s you as an individual to grab your own shovel and your own pick and dig deep.’

‘We don’t want our kids to get out of school and join CDEP. It doesn’t get them anywhere. It doesn’t even provide them training. The main projects that are happening around here are mainly like sea wall and landscaping. And landscaping, you’re supposed to beautify the community, not just rake up, cut the grass every week, because we have two gangs, every week you see them cut the grass and rake up, pick up rubbish and where is that gonna take you?’

‘I think all parents think that there is something better out there for the kids other than CDEP.’

A lack of child care facilities on the islands impacts on family life and the opportunities to participate in the workforce.

‘Babysitting is with other extending family members. No-one bothers to pay others to take care of the children. It’s really a burden for the working parents, especially for parents with kids 0–5 or under 10 years of age.’

The focus groups also reveal a desire for more modern technology, amid concerns about its potential impact on traditional life.

‘It is good, but we need more, more for the remote communities, we need more modern technology, like video conferencing. We have to hold on to our culture if we were to put on or practice the western way of life; we still have to hold on to our culture.’

‘Mobile service, Internet. Mobile, so we want to carry the mobile with us.’

‘For when you go hunting, are travelling on the sea, maybe you break down somehow, so we can have the mobile to get in contact or get help.’

Other service issues raised by the groups include the time frame for police visits, overcrowded housing, the need for a domestic violence shelter, and health care.

‘These health centres have limited facilities as well, so, you know a lot of out of date things, so we need to expand on that, like the locum system, dentist, I don’t know how long it will be on the island for.’

‘Vaccinating our children, there is no stationary doctor, only residential male nurse.’

A big topic for discussion was funding to attend cultural festivals and sporting carnivals—both for adults and for children.

‘Today people are finding it hard to go to these cultural festivals, maybe lack of money, transportation, to get to the festival.’

‘Even our kids, when we have our sports carnival, the three islands, Saibai, Dauan and Boigu, we have to take them in a dinghy.’



Transport is another issue, both on the individual islands and between them.

‘Children come back for holidays, parents don’t want them to travel in a small plane, and they want them to travel in a bigger plane. The incident that happened recently, the propeller stopped then started again. So we want to have a bigger boat or bigger plane, proper pilot, not the trainee pilot.’

‘We need a bus. In this time they walk or run to school when the rainy season.’

Discussion points

A couple of areas were raised briefly in the interviews that may warrant further exploration. Drug and alcohol abuse was mentioned as a problem, but its prevalence and impact was not explored.

There was an obvious concern about the lack of training and meaningful work opportunities. There were particular concerns that young people returning to the communities have no job opportunities or significant career paths for their future.

The cluster is distinctive for its retention of language and traditional culture. Valuable advice could be gleaned for other communities who are also keen to protect their cultural assets.



3.2 Meriam (eastern islands)



Mer (Murray) Island group

The Murray group comprises three small high volcanic islands—Mer, Dauar and Waier. They are located at the eastern end of Torres Strait within sight of the Great Barrier Reef. Mer, with its population of around 450, is the home of ‘the Mabo decision’—Australia’s High Court case to grant native title to the traditional owners of Murray Island.



Ugar (Stephen) Island

Ugar is a volcanic island with fertile soil and dense vegetation that has a population of 50 people.



Erub (Darnley) Island

Erub is the largest of the eastern islands with a population of 375. Erub is a volcanic island composed mainly of lava and ash which has formed a rich soil.



Overview of findings

The Meriam cluster includes the islands of Murray (Mer), Stephen (Ugar) and Darnley (Erub). While many of their issues are similar, there is also significant diversity between them. It is apparent that people on the smaller populated islands are expected to source many of the services and facilities on the larger islands, but lack the resources to do so. This is particularly the case in terms of health care and shopping, where Darnley appears to have more facilities than Stephen Island.

These issues impact on the health and wellbeing of the children. Ugar Island does not have an IBIS shop and the restricted supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables make it difficult for children to receive adequate nutrition.

A major talking point was the children's education. Parents expressed their desire for children to be well educated so that they can have good career opportunities. However the current practice of sending children south to boarding school is seen as a major problem with children suffering homesickness and a lack of discipline. The problems continue when they return to the islands with limited local job opportunities and suffering from being disconnected from their families and culture.

There is concern that the use of local language on these islands is diminishing. Local people are very concerned with their children's cultural identity. They want to maintain dance, song, language and culture in all aspects of life. They worry about how to preserve their own culture while still giving their children access to positive aspects of western culture, acknowledging a need for them to be fluent in English. Communities would like more cultural teaching within their schools.

The limited access to medical and dental care is another worry for families. They would like more regular services and some continuity of care for their children. They identified the major social problem as drug and alcohol abuse, which was seen as stemming from the canteens on the islands. Some advocated more restricted hours for the canteens and the promotion of responsible drinking. It was noted that children were also at these venues and were affected by the negative role modelling.

My life on Mer Island **Male Elder**

'I am an Elder. I was born on 7th July 1938. No white teachers were here then. We had no opportunity for education. Life was hard, we had no bread and not much at all. My Dad went to war in 1938 to 1945. Only had my mother and grandparents here. We had to live day to day. I had to take my kids to Mackay to get them an education. So that they could get an education that I could not get. I have 10 boys and I could not handle them in the current social climate.'

'How can you pass education down to your kids if you don't receive an education yourself? I had to educate myself. When kids go down south they are "lost" because of cultural differences. These differences cause kids to wag school. Parents then get telephone call from school down south saying "your kid is not coming to school, kid is out on the town drinking grog, etc."'

'Kids come back to Murray Island after Year 12 and have nothing to do. So they get on the grog and walk around doing nothing. Parents are not taking responsibility they should be to ensure kids stay in school. Need to do something about it. Try to teach them to plant food, go diving and fishing, but kids find it boring and don't want to do it. I try to show kids these skills which I learnt while I was growing up but the kids are now not interested. Young people think about money not culture.'

'When I was young I had to learn survival skills, find food, water and shelter. Now though, kids rely on IBIS store and it is not good at all for people. The canteen [pub] should be closed down, as all it leads to is violence and murder. Don't need alcohol here, it is destructive. We need to breed respect that used to exist. The island used to be a paradise. There was no alcohol, no litter, and now there is no respect.'

'Need to make the kids busy so that they lose interest in alcohol. Need youth centre and sports ground. When I was young kids did what they were told. They had big respect for parents. The church was strong in the old days. No fishing on Sundays and no alcohol. Now it is all different. People drink alcohol and fish on Sunday. It is no good.'



Themes

Theme 1: Starting out—the early years of life

While extended families play a big role in the raising of children on these islands, participants are of the view that the primary responsibility for the health and wellbeing of the children rests with their parents. It is up to the parents to teach them how to behave in the community.

'Father and mother teach them properly. Father and mother are boss in the house. When you go school, the teacher is the boss. School for kids must start in house. Father teach boy and mother teach girls.'

‘Small children look up to important people, important men in the family and in the community. Others—not just the parents—can discipline the children, like an uncle or an aunty.’

‘Everybody knows it is their role to help discipline the children, because everybody is family.’



A major issue in this area is the availability of fresh, nutritious food for the community. While this is a problem throughout the cluster, it is particularly so in Ugar where there is no store.

‘An island store is needed. Some kids cry for Weetbix to eat. Store is the main thing. Health, education and good food to work the brain are needed. Kids are tired from one food. Can’t feed kids sweets.’

‘Kids getting diabetes due to the low quality food. Parents are not feeding their kids properly.’



Even where there are stores, supplies are limited and often past their expiry date. The parents that were interviewed were aware of the importance of good food for their children's health and expressed a frustration at not being able to influence what is available in the stores.

'The main problem is that fresh fruit and veggies come in on a boat and get sold out on the same day. Why does the shop only get enough fresh food to service a fraction of the community need?'

'When shops run out of healthy food, parents end up feeding their kids junk food, as that is all that is left to buy.'

Others spoke of the need for traditional food gathering and gardening, but some thought that today's young people would not want to do that sort of work.

'Sick to death of make garden. Kids won't cope. Hard life. You go learn them. They did it one time and all sit in garden.'

'You can grow a variety of fruit and vegetables including cassava, yam and banana. That's what we should be eating, not rice, which doesn't grow here. I am 67 years old, I still have a garden.'

The lack of good food was also blamed for resulting dental and medical problems in the children, with the communities also concerned about the very limited access to doctors and dentists for their children. They said a dentist had not visited Mer Island in more than two years. Most visiting doctors were very inexperienced.

'Need more experienced doctors and less trainees. The doctors don't take us seriously here, and they are not around for follow up visits.'

There is also a general awareness that problems for adults in the community impact on children's lives. This included mothers drinking and smoking whilst pregnant, and domestic violence.

'Kids being neglected by parents drinking and smoking in the canteen. No money left for food and other things. It is a bad start to life for those kids.'

The islands do not have child care facilities so parents have no option but to leave children with family or friends. Participants said they would like some choice in child care.



Theme 2: Growing up—school years

The educational needs of children growing up on the islands was an important talking point for participants. The topic is dominated by concern about the negative impact on the children, and the community, when the children are sent south for secondary schooling.

The first challenge for island education is attracting qualified and experienced staff along with resources. As one educational professional explained:

‘School doesn’t get much funding. We need Unifex cubes, science equipment, language games to teach tense and grammar etc. Schools down south have them. We need to buy these and then add the cost of freight to transport up here.’

‘If you read a book you need to explain to them. They don’t understand “broccoli, lollipop lady, zebra crossing, grater”. They need to extend their vocabulary. They have a lack of exposure to the outside world. Even things like buying movie tickets. These kids should go south once a month and be exposed to libraries, shops, movies, buses and road signs. They need to experience this before Year 8.’

While parents expressed their desire for their children to have good career opportunities through education, many are worried about losing influence and control of their children when they are sent south to boarding school.

‘They drink and do drugs when they are away from the parents. They go away and people don’t know what happens down there.’

‘Kids that did well in school up to then can go downhill in their schoolwork because they are homesick.’

‘They run wild. They need proper people to look after them. Kids go to sleep hungry. They don’t have a fridge in their room. They have dinner at 5.30 pm which is early. Later they get hungry and don’t have anything to store food to eat later, like a fridge.’



However, parents also want their children to have greater opportunities in life and some see the boarding schools as a strong positive.

‘I would rather my son go to boarding school. Mixed both black and white kids are good. Otherwise too much influence. Learn timing like getting up and sticking to a schedule. I’ve been to boarding school.’

'I went to school in Charters Tower. During the first term of school the majority of people were white. I found it easier in the second semester, if I don't go out and mix with white people. Going from small community, I miss parents and brothers and sisters. I wanted to go to school to study more and mix with white kids. Bring back home and share. I had a goal that I set in primary school. I always wanted to work in an office and lead my people. I asked my teachers what subjects do I need?'

One community leader described how he had visited and talked to education bureaucrats in Brisbane and elsewhere to push the case for the children to have a Meriam environment. He suggested the establishment of a hostel in Cairns with accommodation where children could come from the Torres Strait Islands. It would also accommodate Aboriginal kids and external students. He saw the potential to create an environment where children who are sent away for schooling could live free of pressure.



There is also frustration that children come back to the islands with an education but extremely limited job prospects within their own communities.

'Kids come back to Mer after finishing school (or leaving early) and they have nothing to do. No job and no hope. So they start to break in to houses and drink grog and walk around doing nothing. Getting into trouble.'

Young people are also frustrated by language problems, both with English and their own languages.

'It is hard for kids going south for high school because their English is different to the mainland kids. They need to learn better English so that the transition is easier for them. Currently Creole is the most spoken language.'

'Even though kids learn English now they are not confident to speak English to white people. If white people speak English to them, they may just look back and smile without saying anything. They are embarrassed to speak English. They need more confidence.'

Parents expressed concern about how they might be able to better discipline their teenagers and encourage them to respect others.

‘Need to breed the respect that used to exist when I was young. We respected our elders then. The island used to be a paradise ... no alcohol, no drugs, no litter etc. Now there is no respect.’

‘Kids tell parents “you no boss, hit me, you go court”. They get more big head. “You’re not my boss and can’t tell me what to do; otherwise I’ll report you and you’ll go to court.” They get more defiant against their parents.’

‘The [community] police need to be stricter—they need more powers.’

‘Our kids up here still have some respect, but we need to be able to address discipline in the home. We cannot do the same as we were—the rules have changed and this makes it harder. Kids know their rights and use it against the parents. The law needs to change.’

‘When we grew up my Dad was strict. When you love somebody you correct them the hard way. You bend bamboo when it is young—it is all about teaching them when they are young.’



The canteens on the islands, where alcohol is served, are blamed for much of the antisocial behaviour amongst young people, with some people suggesting that their hours of operation should be reduced.

‘The canteen should be closed down, as all it leads to is violence and murder. We don’t need alcohol here, it is destructive. Canteen is getting opened after hours. Also, people break into canteen to steal alcohol.’

‘Other kids break and enter for alcohol and drugs. Those kids have parents that are not strong. Youth have opportunities for work on the island, but they avoid it. Rather be drinking. Strong parents can prevent this from happening, but most don’t care.’

The solution from the communities is for more activities for young people. Most suggestions centre around cultural activities and sport and recreation.

‘Need to put something in place for them to do. Planting food, going diving and fishing are good things for kids to learn. Doing a job ... kids can learn things by working.’

‘If there were more sports events it could keep youths interested. Otherwise they spend all their time in the canteen.’

‘If the canteen was open less, and the basketball lights were on as well, then maybe parents would come down to watch the kids play. Community would come together to watch the kids play. It would support kids. Fathers would spend more time with their kids.’

‘The kids have nothing to do—we need a youth centre or somewhere for them to go. They need something to look forward to in the school holidays.’

One youth spoke of what he gained from a cultural camping long weekend for boys.

‘No drugs or alcohol allowed. Elders there too. They talk and tell island stories, culture stories, history stories to the teenagers. Play football on the beach. Catch fish. It brings the brothers together. Encourages kids to not do bad things.’

My language, my culture **Mer Island**

‘It is good to learn here on the Island. When I was in high school on Thursday Island we didn’t learn English. Creole was our language. When you talk to kids in English they look and smile. They need more confidence. Communication is a barrier that would help when our kid gets to the mainland school. They come home because they can’t cope. That is one of the reasons they don’t complete high school. There are racist attitudes down south which drives our people home. Some kids can’t take it. Kids rebel against teacher and other people. There is some liaison officer down there that has helped.

‘Elder son has a good teacher which has made him stronger. He has good discipline and he could survive down there. Need to bring kids up from down south to give them better understanding so they are not strangers. Get people to know each other.

‘My Dad was very strong on culture. He would bring turtle home for me to cut up, that was my job. I learnt my culture down south. I can survive down south and up here. I know how to put down and cut murly. I could cook pizza. I take kids down south so they can survive in both worlds. Ones who stay here can’t live in both worlds. You need someone down south to teach culture so when the kids come home they understand better.’



Theme 3: Family role

In such small communities, the definition of family is very broad and includes blood relations on one level, and the rest of the community on another. All have an impact on the raising of the children.

‘Here, everybody is a cousin or a sister or a brother, and an aunty can be any respected person. We don’t draw the distinctions the way they do down south.’

‘Family is belonging to the community. Women marry and move to another community, so the children are raised with the mother’s and the father’s cultures. Balancing the difference can be hard, but the children grow up with both. “Family” brings its own culture. People from outside might not see the difference between two families’/communities’ cultures—but the difference is there.’

‘Family comes first—it’s very important. Family will help each other. If you are down, people will help for example with providing for a tombstone—everyone will help to get one.’

The family members are involved in the care of the children to some degree and in ensuring their good behaviour. However, there were comments that the role of uncles and aunts has been eroded in recent times and this was seen as adding to the problems for young people.

‘I do what was handed down from my parents. Up here, uncles and aunts are the ones they look up to, and grandparents—I think that has worked for me.’

‘Where no father figure exists you can use brother-in-law or grandfather as substitute.’

‘Everyone is closely related. It doesn’t take one person, it takes a whole village to bring up and educate a child. When they are out playing and aunt or uncle is allowed to discipline them—if my boy swears or talks silly his aunt or uncle can reprimand him.’

‘In my day, our uncle had more authority than the parents. The uncle could whip us ‘til we bleed and the parents couldn’t say anything. If the parents couldn’t control us, they’d take us to the uncles’ places. Today kids don’t really recognise this ... the custom has changed. If the uncle did anything, the parents would have a go at the uncle.’

Grandparents, it seems, hold a special role, particularly in teaching the young traditional ways.

‘Grandparents have good advice. Good to help grow up kids. Pass on culture.’

‘The grandfather is important for giving the history and the cultural rules. Us younger ones have been taught these things, but we can’t take the role of passing it on. The Elders are important for passing these things on properly.’



But while family is considered fundamental to a child's development, many also see religion playing a central role in influencing values.

'Darnley, there is no atheist—here people are all godly, they believe in the faith. This makes people have something in common.'

'I have to teach them what my grandmother taught me. Religion was very strong and I tell them that. Even these kids know how important Sunday is.'

'Religion plays a strong role in helping kids to grow up strong. Kids need to know that the Sabbath is a day of respect.'

Theme 4: Cultural influences

All agreed that children need to know their culture to have a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. The loss of language in these areas is linked by some interviewees to a weakening of the culture.

'The language of the Torres Strait is important and needs to be spoken. Language is still important at Murray Island. If you don't have culture you have nothing.'

'When you learn language, you also learn culture. The Torres Strait language is almost gone. My mother can speak some language and my brother can understand a bit.'

'It's important to keep our culture alive. It's hard to compete with TV. If you lose your identity/culture what do you have?'

'Culture is very important. If you lose your culture, then who are you? Culture is identity.'

Many thought there was a need for more community cultural activities and cultural teaching through school. They worry that there are only a few Elders to properly teach traditional ways and not all parents are capable of doing so.

'Need more boys' camp, where boys can go away with Elders and learn about culture and fishing. It is good for them.'

'Would like to have a girls camp too ... weaving, digging yam, etc. But who would look after the kids? The men would not look after the kids and let women go on camp. Women would have to take kids with them.'



'There are not many dancers now, not many older ones teaching culture. We teach our kids some.'

'Be good to have youth forums with Elders, as not all parents are passing the culture down.'

For the community, there are some worrying influences that interfere with children learning about their culture.

‘Drugs and alcohol draw kids away from culture. If Dad is on the grog then kids don’t learn culture.’

‘Kids more interested in computer games and DVDs than culture stories from grandparents.’

‘Kids rather play X-Box than learn island dance.’

One community leader stressed the importance of children knowing both island and western culture so they could survive in both worlds.

Religion, in the form of Christianity, is very strong on the islands, and is seen as an important guiding creed for the community.



‘Religion is very important. Black people were brought up with God. God taught spirit and wisdom.’

‘God is the foundation of you and me. We have God inside of us all. If you have vision well you are alright, if you don’t have vision then you perish.’

‘Before religion we follow the rule of Malo. That’s why it wasn’t hard to accept Christianity as it had principles and structure. You must have a compass to read and set the direction for you and me. It’s good to bring religion into the school.’

‘The religion on Erub has been very good—it took a lot of people out of trouble. If the music is right for them, and there are games and things that appeal, they will stay.’

Theme 5: Role of services

As relatively small and remote populations, the people on these islands have very limited access to services and have to compete with other, similar islands for resources. Sometimes they are denied a service because it exists on a neighbouring island. Even the availability of essential services like water and electricity are restricted.

‘There are lots of problems with water and electricity. Sometimes there is a water curfew from 8 pm to 6 am.’

‘There is a health issue with the tank water that people use for drinking water. People can get sick.’

Transport is a major issue, both on the islands and between them. This affects how supplies reach the islands. At Ugar, barges require a king tide (every 12 weeks or so) in order to land heavy supplies, due to the reef. It also lacks an airstrip.

‘We only have dinghies or in extreme cases you can charter a helicopter. Unfortunately the helicopter costs \$2,000 per trip so it is way too expensive.’

‘This has a huge impact on general life. Sometimes, when seas are big it is treacherous. Crossing becomes very difficult, especially for old people and children.’



On Mer, people reported that their roads were unsafe.

‘Sheer cliff faces without any barriers to protect cars from toppling over. The roads are unsealed and full of potholes. In the wet season they are also very slippery.’

Access to health services is very limited, with patients needing to travel to Thursday Island for treatment, at their own expense. Registered nurses are based on some islands, with monthly visits from a doctor. Women need to leave the islands to have their babies, which not only affects them, but their families.

‘They are away for a couple of months. This makes life very difficult for fathers as they have to look after all the other kids, and some of them have work as well.’

‘When they get sick it is a worry because of the distance to hospital. If anything happens out here it is a long way from hospital, so I put my trust in God.’



There was positive feedback about the health centre on Erub where services are coordinated.

‘The health centre provides education—very important things like dengue education and other diseases, and healthy eating. The school has a health policy—no junk food. This makes extra work for the parents, because now they have to make the sandwiches and things for the kids’ lunches, but it’s a good thing. The shop, the hospital and the school are working together on health promotion, and now the kids are coming home and telling the parents about healthy eating—they’ll tell them in the supermarket what to buy! I think the services working together has more impact.’

Policing on the islands was raised as an issue, with a belief that community police lacked appropriate powers.

‘The police aren’t strict enough—they have no authority. All they do is break up fights. The family ties make it hard for them to be very strict.’

The provision of housing was also identified as an issue with overcrowding having a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of children in the community. On Mer, the focus group outlined the problem.

‘There are up to three families living in each house. This is too crowded and spreads sickness and disease. Also crowding contributes to lack of food for children. In Torres Strait Islander culture, the men eat first, then wives, and children come last. So in houses with lots of men the children can be malnourished.’

Sport and recreation facilities have a high priority for the community. Erub now has its own stadium, but participants spoke of the need for more organised sport. On Mer, the community is keen for even basic facilities.

‘Need a fence around the basketball court, as it is right on the roadside. Kids run out for balls and get hit by cars. Also need court to have roof and lights. Needs to be kept clean.’

‘Would like a park or stadium for sports. Need to develop sport for kids. Currently only have school basketball court. Football and running is done on the grass airstrip on top of the hill.’

On Erub, the provision of the stadium has led to other opportunities.

‘There are two people from the community that are completing the sport and rec. TAFE certificate, and sport and rec. will be looking at starting kids sport.’



My dream Ugar (Stephen) Island

Rocky Stephen says he was raised on three core values—to respect others, to learn to love one another and forgive wrongs, and to share with family and community.

He went to Cairns and Charters Towers for high school and says he wanted to be among whites so he could learn more and achieve his goals. His goals were to compete in the Sydney Olympics and to become a chairperson for his community.

Rocky gave up a promising athletics career to remain on the Island. He says that representing his community was important but he would also have liked to achieve his personal glory. He had aimed to run at the Sydney Olympics and was training with a coach from Germany while still in high school. At the age of 17 he was given an opportunity to train in America. Rocky's father supported this but his mother thought it was not an opportunity to take at such a young age. His mother was a very loving and caring person who always wanted the best for her children and to keep them safe. With growing up on such a small island she felt it was not the right time or age for Rocky to go overseas.

So what drove his passion to be a leader? He wanted to be like his father, who was chairperson in the early 1980s. Also, his uncle Pedro Stephen became Mayor of Torres Shire Council on Thursday Island. Uncle Pedro gave Rocky a word of encouragement and said if God wanted him to become a leader for his community then it would happen. Uncle Pedro was very encouraging and supportive as were his parents and other members of the family. The young people of neighbouring Darnley Island also gave Rocky their encouragement and support.

Rocky always wanted to be a community leader. While still in high school he made it his goal to become community chairperson by age 30—a goal he achieved in 1999 when just 22 years old—the youngest ever in the Torres Strait Islands.

When Rocky returned from school and became a chairperson of his community he found that there was no employment for people on the island, except for the Community Employment Development Program (CDEP) which involved sweeping up leaves and collecting rubbish. His long-term vision is for CDEP to not be the only work on the island for locals. He wants to make it possible for people to have real careers.

Rocky wants to encourage local people to up-skill, so that the community has more capacity to do things without the need to bring in outside contractors such as electricians, plumbers and builders.

Rocky has been trying to establish a market garden on Ugar for fruit and vegetables through the Community Employment Development Program.

He maintains that community goals are his priority and he will keep fighting until he gets what his community needs. Culture is very important.

'If you lose your culture, then who are you? Culture is identity. Now that we have land rights (through Mabo) the next step is to acquire sea rights.'



Discussion points

While the islands in this cluster share many similarities, they also have some very separate issues.

On Mer, native title has led to conflicts over land use at the community level with one participant describing the Mabo decision as a curse. The issue is demonstrated by a conflict in negotiations for the location of a sports facility, which many believe would be of great benefit to young people on the island.

‘What it means is that individual families now have control over what happens to the land, and no-one will give any land up for general use by the community.’

On Ugar, the major issue surrounds the availability of food following the closure of the IBIS store in 2003 because it was unprofitable.

Community leaders have been trying to establish a market garden on Ugar for fruit and vegetables through the Community Development Employment Program scheme.

There is an even broader issue regarding local control. An area of concern is the exploitation of local resources by other people. One local leader described how it also denies locals of job opportunities. Local jobs would build self-esteem for families and for children.

‘Let’s look at prawn trawlers. Some nights I look out to sea and see the lights of up to 20 trawlers working offshore. The feeling is that those trawlers are taking the bread and butter away from Ugar. They take so much but we don’t gain anything from it. It is a big bite out of our cake ... we don’t even have an airstrip or a shop, yet they make all that money from our fish ... If Stephen had its own trawlers then we could have our own industry here for Stephen and Torres Strait Islanders.’

The issues of local control and greater self-sufficiency are shared across the islands, although the examples differ. The people share a desire to improve the life chances for their children by creating more job options and promoting positive role models. They have a focus on regaining some elements of traditional culture as a means of promoting positive role models, healthy lifestyle and good self-esteem for their children.

3.3 Kaiwalagal (inner islands)



Waiben (Thursday) Island

Thursday Island is the most populous Island in the Torres Strait with a population of 2,300. The island is little more than 4.5 square kilometres, with the main town of Port Kennedy on its southern shores. Waiben means ‘dry place’ and it was due to the lack of fresh water that the Kaurareg people did not live on the island permanently, but rather visited it periodically from Muralag (Prince of Wales) Island.



Tamwoy, Rose Hill, Aplin, Waiben and Quarantine

These suburbs have the largest Torres Strait Island population in the Kaiwalagal region (inner islands). The communities are located on the north-western side of the island.



Ngurupai (Horn) Island

Ngurupai (Horn) Island is one of 18 traditional homelands of the Kaurareg Aboriginal people. During the protection era in the late 1800s and early 1900s the Kaurareg Aboriginal people were removed from their home land of Kirirrie (Hammond) Island north to Moa Island to a village named Poid.

After the Second World War, Chief Elikiam Tom with several Kaurareg families moved back to Kirirrie (Hammond) Island only to find the Catholic mission had taken over the lease on the current village area. They then journeyed to Ngurupai (Horn Island), where a majority of the Kaurareg live to this day.

Ngurupai is the second largest island in Kaiwalagal region and is surrounded by coral reefs and mangroves. The island is quite large and flat with three high hills. With a population of approximately 600 people it has facilities to cater for day-to-day needs with two shops, one hotel/motel and a local pub with accommodation for visitors in transit.

Ngurupai has the main airport facility for people travelling to and from mainland Australia as well as people transferring to the Torres Strait's outer islands.



Overview of findings

The Kaiwalagal cluster of islands is geographically the closest to mainland Australia. The people of Horn Island, the top of Cape York, Prince of Wales Island and parts of Thursday Island are very particular about being identified as Aboriginal; they do not consider themselves of Torres Strait Islander origin. This land is acknowledged as Aboriginal land, and in many parts is owned by Aboriginal people.

Participants listed many positive aspects to growing up on these islands. They enjoy the sense of freedom, the closeness of the small community, the benefits of extended family, and the opportunity to teach their culture in schools.

Education raised a number of issues including the lack of experienced teachers, the problems faced by children when English is their second language, and the practice of sending children south to boarding school. Many were concerned that these children had few career options on their return and had also lost touch with some of their culture and language.

Older people repeatedly expressed concern about the erosion of traditional culture, in particular that young people identified more with the western culture through television programs, popular music and clothing. Most Elders had given serious consideration to how best to reverse this, and were actively involved in programs to teach their culture to the children.

Another key issue was the perceived lack of ‘respect’ from young people for their elders and for their culture. This theme recurred throughout the week of interviews—particularly that people did not believe children today held the same respect given to Elders in past generations.

There were mixed views regarding the sense of community. Some focus group members lamented the loss of the notion of sharing, while others liked the fact that they knew everyone, and felt they could ‘growl’ at other people’s kids if they saw them misbehaving.

Extended families are a norm for this area. In many families it is common for children to be raised primarily by aunties and uncles rather than parents. For some people, this is a traditional method of raising children.

Access to health care was of particular concern on Horn Island where people generally have to make their own way to Thursday Island for any medical treatment beyond the scope of a registered nurse.

Themes

Theme 1: Starting out—the early years of life

The early years of life (birth to five years) were discussed in this cluster in the context of cultural influences and community and family issues.

The focus group on Thursday Island listed a number of fundamental elements for children to grow up strong and healthy, including good parental support, input from the extended family, physical exercise, a feeling of security, a solid sense of culture, and good nutrition.

‘I see so many of our Indigenous kids coming to school that aren’t well nourished. They can’t concentrate, their metabolism is slow so they can’t keep up. It’s not so much the European kids, more the Indigenous kids.’



Participants also identified a lack of discipline and respect and the need to build self-esteem in children.

‘Shame is a big thing with our kids, they’re always worried they will say the wrong thing. We need to build up their self-esteem and confidence.’

A service provider outlined the issues she experienced in her work, acknowledging how the parents’ problems impact on their children.

‘We’re aware of, for example, domestic violence, the high cost of living, the sole dependency on Centrelink. People live for today. That impacts on how we raise our children and what our expectations are. The low self-esteem business in parents: they find that they’re surviving day to day because the community doesn’t give us options. Not many jobs. Who are the role models in our community? And that comes back to how the parents relate to their children and what children are hearing being discussed at home.’

Theme 2: Growing up—school years

Growing up in such a remote location clearly has its benefits and its problems. Sport and recreation play a big part in the lives of young people on the islands. Describing what keeps them motivated, young men listed a range of recreation activities including fishing, reef walking, hunting, gardening, shooting and camping.

The Thursday Island focus group spoke of training programs and youth and recreation programs as working well for child development but commented on the lack of facilities.

‘There’s the pool, the gym, other exercise facilities if they’re used. The other thing we have here in Thursday Island for young people is water (ocean) that you can swim in, that is, no stingers like other tropical locations.’



In contrast, boredom was repeatedly cited as a major problem. A Port Kennedy grandmother said there was little for youth to do.

‘Not much. Just hang around and do nothing. Maybe CDEP [Community Development Employment Program]. No sports. Stay home.’

A group of Elders also spoke of boredom as a factor in social issues.

‘There was nothing for us when growing up. We built our own basketball court, and we’d use the carpark for a football field. Kids today are getting bored.’

‘When it was raining, we used to go riding and go crabbing, but now parents worry about croc. The kids still need something to do.’

Young men in the focus group cited drugs and alcohol as the major challenge facing the community. The young men speak of the importance of friendships—that they get together to talk ‘most of the time’. When asked what is important in terms of growing up in the community, a male replied:

‘We need jobs and we need our friends.’

There are a number of issues associated with education. Some participants described a language barrier as children battle with English as a second language. A woman spoke of her recent experience:

‘Schooling was hard, it was hard having to speak English because we speak Creole at home. I had troubles studying, maths was okay but mainly English. That was very difficult. Even now, I fully don’t always get correct with my spelling. I still find it very hard to speak English. Schooling was good, from grade 1 right up to grade 7. High school, up here, compared to boarding schools down south, I found it a bit too easy. And because of that I found that I was slacking off at school because I didn’t feel I really had to learn and concentrate in class. Only now that I’m working, and this is my second year, I regret it, I wish I did better at school.’



Parents agree that language is a major issue.

‘Often our kids feel inadequate because of the language barrier. There must therefore be something wrong with our education system.’

‘In school, if teachers don’t understand Creole, this leaves a big language barrier for our kids. At my school there is no ESL [English as a second language], but you can still “go to their level”; don’t use big words, keep it simple.’

Many children are sent to boarding school to finish their secondary schooling. A number of participants commented that when they return to the islands they face problems with employment and loss of culture.

‘Make sorry to make kids go to school, come back to do nothing. Europeans come, make money, go—but we got nothing to show for it. Our kids go to school, but come back to do nothing. Alcohol and drugs.’

Older adults lamented the lack of respect from young people and the restrictions on discipline.

‘But we can’t flog our kids because that’d be called child abuse. We used to get flogged all the time for playing up, and if other family saw us mucking up in public they’d growl us, but today families say no.’

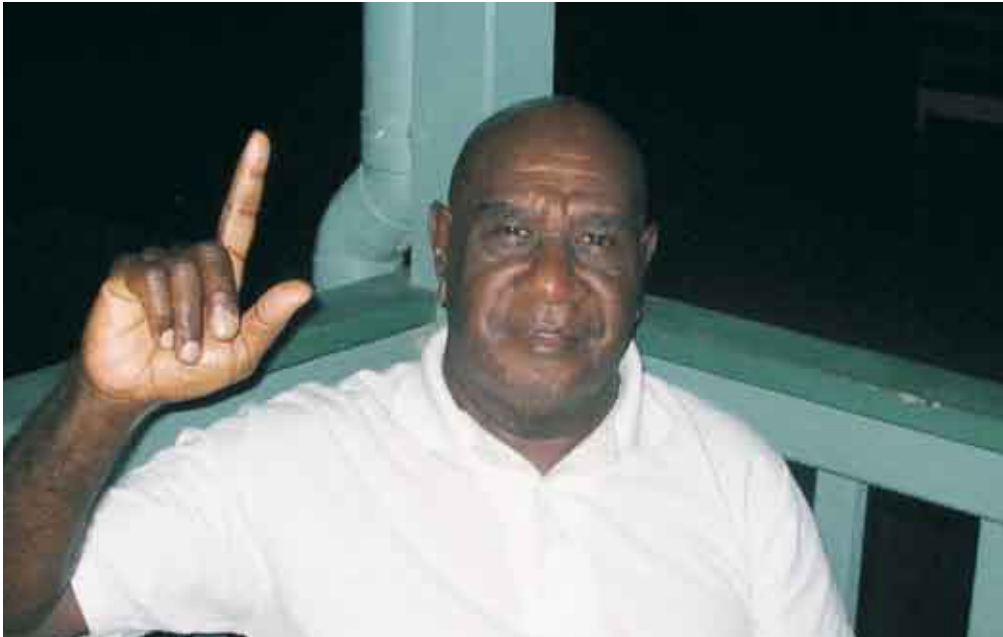
‘I learnt that Elders are to be respected, but the generation after me, they’re into TV, violence, swearing. People turn to the streets, hang around and cause trouble. They get into drugs and alcohol. Sure there’s police, but what is the family doing about this?’



The relative isolation impacts on children when it comes to choosing careers, both in terms of options that are available on the islands and in the lack of exposure to potential jobs.

‘Probably in grade 7 the teachers were asking us what we would want to be when we grew up. In high school now you get to choose certain subjects that will help your career when you leave school, whatever we want to become. And I found it hard here because I didn’t know what jobs there were, unlike the kids down south who know what’s available. The only jobs I knew about were the ones here on Thursday Island. There were career markets but we didn’t really understand the jobs. We just picked up the information.’





Theme 3: Family role

There is a deep sense of community identity evident from participants' broad definition of family. Many participants shared this view which identifies family as close friends as well as extended and close family.

'Everyone in this room is family—blood or not. For a show of respect we will say brother, sister or aunty. Even for outsiders, whether New Zealander or from wherever.'

Families are seen as key influencers in teaching young people values.

'In island culture, the uncle is the head, the one who lays down the law to the young fellas.'

'Family—they support you. They show you the right way. Let you know what's right from wrong.'

'A good set of values, support. I try to pass these things on to my kids.'

'... I was taught by my Mum's side—I went to them. They showed me the way. It's like a cultural thing, if you're in trouble you go to your mother's side of the family. You ask your aunty, uncle, they're like your Mum and Dad as well.'

Families are also criticised for the perceived breakdown in discipline and respect.

'I was disciplined to respect my elders, to trust my uncles and aunties. But it's totally different dempla now.'

'We need to bring structure back to our community because at the moment it's running wild. Parents don't know how to deal with their kids, they just give in. It comes down to disciplining kids. Parents need to express to their kids what is and isn't acceptable.'

The extended family is also the major teacher of culture. Young men identified the importance of the family for teaching basic skills.

'... teach cooking, damper, scones.'

'... hunting, diving, fishing.'

A grandmother described how it worked in her family.

‘... it’s one of our customs as aunties to teach the girls cooking, domestic things, women’s things. That’s my role too with my sisters’ kids and my brothers’ kids. Be their advocate too, when they get in trouble. Very strong family structure. Everyone has a role. My two big brothers talk to my son about men/boy things. Take him fishing, all the man/boy things.’

‘I’d say what works well for my kids is that they’ve been taught a lot of life skills that will be with them for life. Things like camping, fishing. I teach the girls cooking and sewing, and my husband teaches my boys how to fish.’

Extended families also play an important role in caring for children in helping the parents and providing informal childcare.

‘I was a single parent with two kids and I had that support system, 100 per cent, 200 per cent to help me rear my children, particularly as a single parent. They’re very important. Family is what God’s given you.’



The service provider observed the broad scope of families.

‘Family structures are very specific to a family group, very personal. We get to know these structures. For example, permission to pick up children, godmothers play a big role. I would think of the aunty but sometimes it’s the godparent. I’ve been concerned about the erosion of extended family, so it’s good to see the importance of godparents, who may not even be immediate family.’

The closeness of the extended family bonds was spoken about by the young men who agreed that they could ask a family member for help. In one of the in-depth interviews, an older man talked of the strength of families.

‘In my own childhood experience, when I grew up, my brothers and sisters we don’t sit around and talk about problems. The mentality, we understand mepla. In general you do need to sit down and communicate, but we don’t need to have that communication. We talk in our mind, not verbal. We talk with body language and mind. We understand these things, how we feel, because of our upbringing. We understand facial expression, we speak with our mind, our spiritual mind. Like today we cooperate. We’re working together cooperatively.’

The closeness of the community also has its negative aspects. Young men in the focus groups commented:

‘If something bad happens in the community everyone knows about it and it touches your life’ and ‘if there’s a death or accident, living in a small community you know everyone.’

And from an older male:

‘It’s a small community and everyone knows everyone else. You hear if someone’s in trouble, and that’s a positive.’



My family Horn Island

‘My family is very close knit. We share common things together. We develop things together, with our children. I have six sisters and two brothers, so when it comes to women’s business I have my sisters to fall back on. It all depends on what age group. My sisters all live here.’

‘If you don’t have that family structure that’s when all the problems set in, because the family is the baseline of everything. My family, I can’t so without my family because they’re my support system. I was a single parent with two kids and I had that support system, 100 per cent, 200 per cent, to help me rear my children, particularly as a single parent. They’re very important. Family is what God’s given you.’

‘My Mum and Dad raised my children and asked me to get on with life, go and do what I wanted to do. So, out of respect, I didn’t want to offend my Mum and Dad. I went with the family. They were the carer but I was there to support. It’s a two-way thing. My Mum and Dad were the head, and my brother and his wife and children we all helped. As a single parent I lived with my Mum and Dad, my brother and his wife and his four children. They were the support when I wanted to do my own thing and we shared the load of bringing up the children. We all look after our kids.’



Theme 4: Cultural influences

The loss of culture was one of the major talking points in the interviews. However, many also talked of measures to try to teach children about their traditions. There was general agreement that a focus on culture would improve outcomes for children.

‘I tell my kids that in spite of how they look, no matter what the colour of their skin, if you know who you are and accept who you are, you’ll feel good about yourself.’

‘There are role models in our community, and I always point them out to my kids. We have Uncle J. [and], Uncle R. here. I’d love my kids to follow in the family footsteps, but they are also individuals and need to follow their own path. There are a lot of good role models in the community, even in jobs held by white people. I always tell my kids they can be a doctor if they want or whatever. And when they go away, to promote their identity and country: Eddie Mabo is known globally.’

‘We’d love them to grow up in our footsteps, but they ... we were taught by our parents how to respect Elders. This what we want them to do. Now more westernised side but we want them to keep our culture, learn who we are, but at the same time learn western culture.’

For many, there is a battle between Indigenous culture and outside cultural influences, particularly from television.

‘I feel they need a balance between our own Indigenous culture and other cultural influences such as television and music.’

‘With all the other influences that come into the community, trying to be someone else that they’re not. All this American music, trying to be someone else. Not really knowing who they are because of all these interferences from society. Like black Americans, the music, the way they talk, their actions. That’s not our way of doing, that’s not our way of life, and that’s confusing for our young people. I suppose you can have the best of both worlds but there are certain limits, certain boundaries.’

For the older people, there appears to be great anguish at the loss of culture, as evidenced in the following exchange in a focus group.

Adult woman: ‘Our Elders are dying and so our cultural games are dying with the older generation. We need to link them (pointing to two Elders) to this generation. For example, I can’t weave or sew the island dress. Boys like spear fishing, but don’t have the knowledge of where to find fishes or how to make a spear.’

Adult man: ‘This is where respect comes in. Sit with Elders, learn something that is going to benefit you in the long run. Make a mat, learn the tide. Our Elders have no-one to pass their knowledge on to. Younger kids today don’t want this knowledge, don’t want to learn this cultural stuff or how to speak their language.’

Elder: ‘I feel shame, I have failed.’

Adult woman: ‘No, not shame, not your fault. We need to use cultural influence as a role model. I went to school in Townsville and my uncle always said culture is your identity, traditional law is your role model.’



The older people feel a responsibility to pass on their culture, and expressed frustration that not all young people shared this interest. However, a number of Elders and traditional owners interviewed were actively involved in teaching cultural practice.

‘My uncle taught me how to fish, where to look for fish, when to get turtle, the best time to get dugong, make spear, dancing. I still practice today. The reason I’m doing this is because, like you go to Boigu and the kids walk around looking like they came from the Bronx. That’s the influence of TV. Only certain parts of the islands, only Poruma and Murray, uphold their culture. [On this island] the only cultural program for kids is after school care. We take the juveniles, we take them out to the islands and we set up with them. We can teach them how to cut trees, go hunting, fishing, dancing.’

‘Talk old days for my kids—slow, hard way not easy way. So they can handle own responsibility. Culture, slow cooking, so show visitor how to make “coconut rice”. Tell them “never stop praying”.’

Schools are seen as having an important role in teaching traditional culture as part of the school program. While Indigenous language was viewed as very important, some also stressed the importance of children being fluent in English.

‘They learn at school white people English, that’s what will take them to the top, but it’s also important they learn their culture, their language. I tell my grandchildren: read, pick up book, get interested in it. I can talk language to them as well.’

‘Certain days they practise their songs. Men and women teach. They go Canberra to show our culture—certain trips. Can have fun.’

‘The primary school has a good program where Elders are brought into the school to talk about culture and traditions.’



Even traditions such as the sharing of food have changed—a change seen as reflecting the loss of culture and respect.

‘In the old days one turtle would feed the whole village, can feed all, but now one turtle would go to one family, there’s no sharing.’

‘The loss of culture, no culture is having an impact. In the old days we’d need our culture to live. Everything now though is at our fingertips and we’ve become lazy.’

‘The difference then to now is respect. If we saw an old person we would always ask if they wanted something, ‘cause we’re all one family. We passed this on to our children and would share much. Respect in the community is lacking.’

The island context is central to daily lifestyle. Young men in the focus group said some of the best things about growing up there were ‘quiet and peaceful’, ‘fishing—diving if the tide is low’.

An adult woman held a similar sentiment.

‘I’d say the one thing we have up here for our kids is freedom. Our kids have the freedom to be kids, we don’t have to worry about “maniac people”, there’s no crazy things that happen up here. That’s why after school programs don’t work up here; nobody uses them, we don’t need them. It’s like if you see someone else’s kids out in the street you can say to them: “Shouldn’t you be home? I’ll tell your mother!”’



Theme 5: Role of services

The limited services available on some islands have a considerable impact on daily life. Of greatest concern appeared to be the lack of medical services, with only Thursday Island having comprehensive medical facilities, including a hospital and primary health clinic.

‘Horn Island has a registered nurse, but if it’s more serious then you have to go to Thursday Island, and you have to pay your own way there, that is to the wharf, to Thursday Island, and from Thursday Island wharf to hospital. In a real emergency then there’s the chopper, but the outer islands get a better health service than Horn Island.’



Education was another major issue with participants concerned that many teachers lacked experience, having only recently graduated.

‘Education is good but we keep getting new teachers. We need teachers who are experienced, with 5–6 years experience, not the just-graduated ones.’

‘Inconsistency of teaching staff. Always moving on, different teachers every year. Some of my kids repeated. M ... passed high school but feel he didn’t know enough for what he wanted to do. Teachers need to understand these kids. Come out at end—know nothing, no job, sit in street. Learn sports, more sports.’

For many parents is the additional concern that eye and ear infections and speech difficulties in their children may be picked up too late, and the problems this causes with their schooling.

‘They can go through school and not have these problems picked up until the end.’

While many children are sent south to boarding school for secondary education, some participants said more needed to be done for children remaining on the islands.

‘The TSRA [Torres Strait Regional Authority] offers scholarships but these seem to be geared towards kids who want to go south rather than stay in their community. Why can’t these departments have something to keep kids in the Torres Strait? There are also issues with funding these scholarships. Also, kids who return to Horn Island from boarding school, what is there for them here where they can apply the knowledge and skills learnt at boarding school?’



Caring for children is largely viewed as a community responsibility. While the extended family often helps with child care, that is also an issue in the provision of services.

‘Single parents bring up children—nowhere to help before. Grandchildren with grandparents while parents go to work. Now they pay child care centre—but government support is not enough to pay child care centre, babysitting. We try to educate our children: don’t have children!’

‘Torres Strait has a need, maybe not for child care, but for a place where families can get together with their children. And somewhere children can enjoy their childhood. Often in the community we see that young girls, even though they want to stay on through high school, if they do have a responsibility to care for siblings, they will leave school early at year 8 or 9. Then they get married and end up having their own kids very early. They’re already in that caring, nurturing role and they haven’t really enjoyed their own life.’





My service

Director of child care centre, Thursday Island

'We can often identify whether the child needs additional support. Often the parent misses that. They are all positive things ... our observation skills are better and the network of links with people in health is really important. At the beginning, all staff are expected to do certain modules including observation and report writing, and you actually put down what you see, record what is actually happening. Those are the sorts of things that have been a focus and I think as we develop the philosophy of the centre, there are particular things in an Indigenous centre that may not be similar to a mainstream centre.'

'Here it is about being the eyes and ears of parents who may not possibly have the skills—they may not understand the importance of good parenting because they are so young. Our parents are very young. We teach our children first of all self-awareness and that is celebrated through NAIDOC [National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee] week and cultural activities centre. Every day they learn that stuff and we try and always remind them and we have music and singing and those sorts of things.'



Discussion points

The participants in this cluster raised many issues of general importance to the community. While more detail about the actual experiences of children growing up on the islands would be worthwhile, particularly regarding positive aspects of growing up in the Torres Strait, community members were able to identify those areas in the region that need improvement if children's development is to be maximised. More detail about what constitutes a 'good upbringing' would add value, and round out these broader discussions.

Other issues that were often mentioned in the interviews, but not explored in detail, include the impact of religion and how this interrelates with traditional custom in the raising of children. Issues experienced by the community with drugs and alcohol were also discussed in many interviews, and were of particular concern to Elders and community leaders who viewed young people as especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of these substances.

There appears to be a view that all the ‘good jobs’ and businesses on the island are owned and/or operated by non-Indigenous people, or people from outside the Torres Strait. Parents were concerned that this was a barrier to keeping young people in the islands, and to the ongoing regeneration of economic benefit back to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, particularly those children who returned to the islands from boarding school.

Education was discussed from several standpoints. Opportunities for children who return to the islands from boarding school ‘down south’ were of particular concern to parents, who questioned the cost/benefits of children being sent south to boarding school. This was mentioned in the context of parents who qualify for Australian Government scholarships to send children to private boarding school. English language competency was also mentioned, and suggests a need for greater investment in English as a Second Language programs.

The frequency and cost of transport between the islands was also raised on a number of occasions as a significant problem; in particular that there is no community-sponsored ferry between Thursday Island and Horn Island. This issue was discussed in a similar vein to the business opportunities for local people, and is worth exploring in this context.

Finally, positive aspects of being raised on Thursday Island and Horn Island are numerous—freedom for children to be children, growing up with a sense of community, being raised with extended family, and the range and scope of recreational activities that promote health. These include fishing, walking on the reef, boating, and various sporting activities.

3.4 Kulkalgal (central islands)



Yam Island

Yam Island is a small, vegetated granite island of the central island group. It has a population of approximately 400 people.



Warraber (Sue) Island

Warraber Island is a 93 acre low lying coral island that is fringed with extensive home reef systems. It has a population of 237 people and will soon be home to a new motel and conference facility jointly funded by the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the Department of Transport and Regional Services, Regional Partnerships Program.



Poruma (Coconut) Island

Poruma Island has a population of 188 people and is located centrally within the central island group. The island consists of a coral cay and is 1.4 kilometres long with a maximum width of just 400 metres.



Masig (Yorke) Island

Masig Island is the largest of the central island group measuring 2.7 kilometres long with a maximum width of 800 metres. Although it is the largest by size, it is second by population size in this group with some 288 people calling Masig Island home. The island consists mainly of a coral cay similar to Poruma Island.



Overview of findings

The Kulkalgal cluster includes the islands of Poruma (Coconut), Masig (Yorke), Yam and Warraber (Sue). While many participants spoke about a decline in traditional culture, there are still many strong community customs and practices that help with the raising of children.

The tight-knit communities share responsibility for many aspects of children's daily lives. Extended family plays an important role in the teaching of customs and culture but also in the disciplining of children. Many stressed the importance of respect and good manners. However, parents retain the primary responsibility for the early teaching of their children and many stressed the importance of routines and house rules.

Education is valued as an opportunity for young people to improve their job opportunities. However career options are very limited on the islands. There is also considerable concern about the impact of external influences on children who are sent away to boarding school for their secondary education. The problems include a loss of discipline, exposure to drugs and alcohol, and further loss of customs and traditional cultural practices.



Many participants identified how life for children on the islands has changed in recent generations. The growth of communications and technology has increased the influence of western culture. With regular freight arriving on the islands, traditional food gathering and gardening is not a priority for young people and many are worried that those skills will disappear.

Language is regularly cited as an issue. While most speak Creole, there is debate over whether children should be taught English as a first language to increase their education and career outcomes, or whether there should be a renewed focus on traditional languages. On some islands, there are very few speakers of their traditional language.

The loss of culture is a key concern for many. While some formal cultural activities are organised by the community and through school, there is a feeling that children are not interested in learning traditional ways. In some areas, there are few Elders left to teach them.

Christianity is widely practised, with many people attending regular services on at least a weekly basis. Some participants were of the view that religion and traditional practice could sit comfortably together, while others were concerned that Christianity had led to a reduction in cultural activities.



The relative isolation of the communities creates many challenges. There are only limited health services available in some areas and a lack of formal child care and recreational facilities. There is frustration at the lack of career options for most people on the islands and little for young people to do when they return from boarding school. This is seen as a major cause of drug or alcohol misuse.

However there are also many strengths to island life. The extended family structure is a major support network for children and their parents. Many also value the island lifestyle with its slower pace and relative freedom.



My life on Yam Island

'I was brought up by my grandparents, as is the tradition to transfer values to children. They were hard time for us. No services. Get the water from the well etc. I went away and came back thinking I could make a difference to this community. I married, my wife had a previous marriage and children. We have eight children. Now we have electricity and many other services. Changes are good.'

'We share our responsibilities at home taking control of our grandchildren and take care of them. We sit and talk about what goes on. We talk around the table or any time. Take time to listen to them, not work all the time. It shows up from the initial stage when you are there for them. They will be there with you when they grow older, later on bringing their mates home.'

'I regret caring spirit in my generation is disappearing with modernisation, this has dissipated. Good values need to be passed on. Need to have respect for your tradition and culture. And religion does play a part morally in teaching the right way. Tradition and religion should run in parallel. Appreciate one another, respect one another.'

'I would like for my children in the future not to lose our culture and tradition. To know who they are—their identity. That they love, respect and go away and get married, get job, have good values.'



Themes

Theme 1: Starting out—the early years of life

The early years of life are recognised as laying the foundation for later behaviour. Many participants spoke of the importance of discipline, of setting house rules and regular routines, with children expected to contribute through household chores.

'A child's life starts at home. Grow them up good they will come out good.'

'The home is the learning environment and it should provide teaching tools.'

'Always give them time and find the time.'

'Reading books to kids, maybe bedtime stories. You have to find the time between sunrise to sunset in amongst all the other things you do on a daily basis.'

'The mother has to give the love for the children. The father is there to give the discipline.'



There was some discussion that smacking or hitting children is not considered an acceptable way to discipline children, although some defend hard discipline. The parents are considered to hold the main responsibility for teaching their children good behaviour.

‘Try not to hit them it doesn’t work, talk through it.’

‘If you gonna punish them, give them home detention and tell them they can’t play with their friends after school.’

‘Aunty and uncle, they used to flog the piccaninny and they run to grandma too. Not flogging, she’s the peaceful one.’

‘You discipline the child the way you like, if you don’t discipline them in the five years they won’t do anything.’

‘It starts in the house. Mum and Dad should spend more time today with kids, not neglecting them. Ask Elders. The years come and go, but the family structure with regard to education and teaching within families should change.’

One mother on Poruma described how she preferred to discipline her children at home, rather than in public, by sitting them down and talking to them. She would tell them that their behaviour makes her look bad. She would expect an apology. She would also reward them when they do behave.

The benefit of good nutrition was also acknowledged with some participants wanting more healthy food options available in local stores.

‘What they eat, when they eat, is vital for them to grow up strong.’

‘Kids eating too much chocolate which leads them to visiting the dentist regularly.’

The languages that children learn are of considerable concern. Many expressed that it was important that children were encouraged to speak English to enhance their future job and educational prospects, but for most, Creole is their first language.

‘English should be encouraged for our children to learn for education to get good jobs.’

‘For me it’s okay for them to use English, but at the same time it’s important for them to use Creole too, because if you teach them English right through they will speak English when they leave high school, then Creole is going to be lost too.’



My household Poruma Island

'We have rules in the house, and every kid must abide by the rules. Even night time rules. You come home 10.30 pm—just don't bother coming home. They all know this. So if every time they come do the things we asked, we give them a hug from the oldest down. And tell them why, even for bad things, don't do bad things. When I been grow up, when my Dad hit me, that was it. No sorry said. But I never wanted that to be taught to my kids. I was brought up a life different. My punishment was hit with a hose, and you can see the scar on my leg from being hit with a spear. This was my punishment for not doing work at home. This was how I was brought up. I don't want my kids to be brought up in life like that. Even if one do wrong thing, we put the rod of correction, we call them together and say sorry, say sorry, tell them why we belt them and don't do it again. At the end of the day, we must hug them and kiss them.'

'Main rule that we have in our home, and this probably apply to every house, first thing is no swearing inside the house. If you want to do this, out of our home, not with us in our home. One other thing, like how I like to keep the house clean. It must be clean at all times. What I cook you have to eat. But the main thing is no swearing, and no arguing with one another.'

'Last night at community barbeque I talked to my brother and we shared how we be brought up. Not my Mum, but my Dad was a very rough man. So that lifestyle I don't want my kids to learn that way. When you grow up, one whistle you run, second you get hit with a stick, waiting for you at home. That was that time then, but this time now when you use stick in front of other [non-Indigenous] people you can be in trouble. Today I thank God for what was given to me then, and esso [thank] God for who I am today. I thought that was rough and it was rough but it put me in line for who I am now. So, now I can raise my children the way that I want to raise them can be different. That was a different environment altogether.'

'When my kids play at anyone's place and if one of them break the rules there, and that aunty or uncle come to me too, and speaks to me. We speak to that person and ask him if he ok and let that person growl at him in front of me. Otherwise if they was at their place and something was wrong and the aunty growl, then it always ok. But one thing I no like when they growling is to use the swear word with them. I allow them to growl at my family, discipline them, but no swear word, I don't do that. Even my brother belt them or their cousins when their mother not there. We allow them to do that because if you're not there, they're there.'





'I am thankful today, for this lifestyle that I am living in today, for who I am today as a mother and as a wife. Whereas I used to drink and used to party, I never been a mother then. My kids got dump them at adopted Mum and Dad's on Yam. Then I go and drink. But from that time 'til now I'm thanking to God I can be a mother and no matter what the circumstances is, I ask God if I can be a mother to them now. Whereas they be missing out so many things when I was drinking. Today I consider this be good. I am thankful today for when I come I can make that commitment to be a mother for them, be there for them, from the older to the little one, or wherever. Because I could lose so many things. Thank Christ for so many things.'



Theme 2: Growing up—school years

Growing up on the islands has changed significantly over recent years, with many survey participants commenting on the changes to education, community and recreational activities since their own childhood.

Education is valued and is strongly associated with career opportunities.

'Our school here is better for them. They have a lot of things to do now, more opportunities. We didn't have much when I was growing up.'

'School now means better jobs. I tell me kids also to learn properly. They have more chance now in gaining better education by going further to universities.'

'Education now is better looking back from my time. We have technology now, which means better education, more opportunities. We have the chance to pick in decision making. I ask my son what you want to be when you grow up. My father told me what he wanted me to be and that is where I am today.'

It was recognised that parents still had an important role in education, even after children started school.

‘We should try combining education with parents by getting Elders to speak with parents and children to ensure there aren’t different messages.’

‘The council is trying to structure culturally appropriate programs, but services say “our way or no way”. High school has an impact influencing/changing our culture.’



This account of education and opportunity came from an older man on Warraber Island:

‘My teacher cursed me, and the way he treated me ... playing cricket [with a bat] on my backside! I suffered in the winter months in Adelaide with hardly any money, [living off] Abstudy. But through all that hardship, I kept going—where there’s a will there’s a way. Seized the opportunity and made sacrifices and hard commitments ... So look for fire, drive, perseverance, and stamina within yourself.’

On Poruma there was a bit of debate about some children missing out because parents/families do not have a routine for their children, which means that children sleep late and do not attend school/preschool. Also some parents choose to keep their children at home for company for themselves or because they did not trust the various service providers.



One of the major issues for the communities is how teenagers are affected by being sent away to boarding school for their secondary education. There are concerns about the loss of culture and negative impacts such as exposure to drugs and alcohol.

‘Respect in the community, this should especially be told to the teenagers because now when they return back from high school they tend to use outside influence style with music and in the way they talk.’

‘Some kids come back different. There’s more Americanism in kids today.’

‘Even the way we speak, we forget about what environment we came from and tend to act differently when we come back home.’

‘Kids come back from school to community and become bored; this leads to drugs and alcohol.’

Efforts to address boredom and keep children active were considered difficult because of a lack of after school and recreational options.

‘Programs and activities are needed after school including weekends and holidays.’

‘We used to play games—hide and seek, rounders, go fishing after school. Not happening much these days for kids. Like they’re not interested in gardening.’

A recommendation that emerged in many of the interviews was for Elders to play more of a role in teaching young people as a way of reversing the problem of diminishing respect.

‘I regret caring spirit in my generation is disappearing. With modernisation, this has dissipated. Good values need to be passed on.’

‘I have been invited by this school to come up and talk to the kids as an Elder about respect. I will also tell them that to use all the opportunities they have now correctly because in my time there was nothing available for us.’

‘We’re losing our Elders which means there’s less and less taking home from the Elders.’

A major positive factor in raising children on the islands is the close-knit nature of the communities. This was identified by a number of interviewees.

‘It’s good to have people around you that you can rely on to help you. In this community there is that support.’

‘... the closeness of the community where kids can walk to school. So it is good here.’

Theme 3: Family role

The responsibility for raising children in the island communities extends well beyond their parents to other family members, particularly aunties and uncles. The definition of ‘family’ is very broad, and includes nearly everyone in the community.

‘In Yam, everybody is related here, so there’s a lot of [family] support here.’

‘The boys learn a lot from the uncle. Girls learn from the aunties, but the main teachers are the parents.’

‘Always aunty or someone else in family ... island tradition is everyone helps.’

‘We share our responsibilities at home taking control of our grandchildren and take care of them. We sit and talk about what goes on.’

‘My aunty, she one of the most important people. She teach me how to read, prepare coconut leaves and cook with them.’

‘When they are out playing family members would ring up to tell us if my child is playing over at their place. This community we all are families so we all look out for one another’s children.’



The theme of respect emerges strongly again in the family environment, with a feeling that it has lessened in recent years.

‘Kids respect me. I tell them to call me grandfather and when I go past their homes, say hello to me. It goes for maybe two weeks then it fades away. Respect is very important kids should be taught this.’

‘Respect is what they need. For family members, not just parents. I teach them the relationships between my families and my husband’s family so they know who to respect in calling them the appropriate titles like aunty, uncle, sissy, or bala etc.’

‘Respect is hardly there any more. There’s more disrespect to families—we need to pass on that respect.’

‘Different generation today in terms of respect. Today’s generation has a very easy life. In our days we respected our elders.’

Some participants spoke about the clear rules that they have in their own households. This description is from a mother on Poruma:

‘Main rule we have in our home and this would probably apply in most home today, first things is no swearing, if you want this done you do this out of our home not with us in our home. How I like to live my home clean, this must be clean at all times. What I cook you are expected to eat. But the main thing is no swearing. Do not argue with one another.’

‘And now I can raise my kids how I think is best not how it was done before. That was a different environment altogether. Hit by a hose across the palm and hit by a spear is a scar I will carry for the rest of my life. The scar shows evidence of hard punishment. There was no sympathy shown by my father, it was very hard then. Today we have rules and my kids abide by that rules.’

Family activities are considered important, particularly when related to cultural events. Those that were described included going fishing together, crabbing, preparing for feasts, cooking, going to church and gardening.



My children Poruma Island

'If you want to be a good parent you must share in the child's life. If you don't share in their life, then the division come between family. Kids relate to you, they love their mother but they don't like you [the father], because they can see, smell the atmosphere what going on in family. If you find mother and father together, that the best long life.'

'If the children go off the road ... the mother and father they must both try and get the kid back into line. Make sure he's home at right time to have a meal, go to bed, bath and everything. You discipline the child the way you like. If you don't discipline them in the five years, they won't do anything. You make sure you deal with that child from one to five years, as the best area to do with the young child.'

'Make sure your home has everything that is of interest to the child. Books to read, other play thing in the playground. Parents looking to [things] to keep your child occupied every day at home. So they won't go away, from what you want them to do. If the home is empty, the child is empty.'

'Parents are always the first teacher for a child at home for everything when the child grows. When they become a certain age, you treat like an adult. You can let him do something, but you make sure he do the right thing. Don't let him go like happen with some parents—when the child come to 12 and you let him free, and don't say anything any more and that is bad. He'll turn around and twist any other way. You make sure you follow him behind. That's the best thing to do until he is adult. Because when he becomes an adult he can understand for himself now, he can do something right. You there to guide him on that track.'

Theme 4: Cultural influences

The retention of traditional cultural activities varies between the islands. Most participants agree that they would like to see a stronger sense of cultural identity instilled in their children. In some places, there is a feeling that already too much has been lost and the community lacks Elders and people skilled in cultural practice to teach young people. However, the following account from one respondent demonstrates a belief that culture is instilled deeply in people.

‘We different race of people. As an islander, the culture thing is in our blood. It’s there—so it don’t need exercise ... Some other culture different. Must learn—because the culture must learn to identify you.’

A participant on Masig described their major cultural activities:

‘Tombstone opening, fishing, dancing at night, wedding. We don’t have big money to buy nice wedding dress so we sew our own traditional dress and this works out cheaper for us.’



It is common on all the islands for aunties and uncles to take some responsibility for teaching culture to children. This includes bush medicine, catching dugong, basket weaving, island cooking, gardening, island dancing and singing. But there is also concern that young people are not interested in learning these activities.

‘Kids now are lazy for garden—we go to the store.’

‘Taking boys out fishing is dying out. Baskets before, now buckets.’

‘Traditional cooking and diving for trochus is also dying out.’

‘Today culture is lost. But if you try and break a coconut leaf and then the kids to make a ball out of it. They have no idea. This may seem small but it was meaningful in our days ... we are trying to regain culture on special days like NAIDOC [National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee] day but this only happens once a year.’

‘There are culture activities, but the sad thing is you don’t get to see much young people.’

‘We were taught how to make garden, look after it, but not like kids today. They don’t worry much about garden, but in our days it was different. We must learn how to make garden, everything—plants. It’s an easy life today. No work, no food!’

Participants also spoke of how the previously common practice of sharing with the whole community had also declined in recent times.

‘Sharing is a big thing, I would got away and get something and come back and share it with my families. If there is only little bit then I distribute to my immediate families. For example, sons and daughters and their families.’

‘Cutting turtle and sharing around to each houses in the community doesn’t happen anymore. Only a few people get a bite now when this happens today. People these days take care of their own family.’



The decline in sharing is associated with views that there has been a general reduction in traditional cultural practice on the islands amid the growing influence of western culture.

‘It’s shame to wear island dress.’

‘Fitting in with other cultures: when in Rome do what Romans do, but reflect Warraerians. We find that outside impact is trying to change us—even though we have our own identity within us we are Indigenous people!’

‘When exposed to other culture there are a lot of mix up. Two different things. Even when they go away, we as parents still remind them of their own culture.’

‘I disagree in adopting European lifestyle when we as islanders got our own. This is always something bad when outside influence is brought into our own lifestyle.’

‘Teach them good eating habits. Expose them to exercise, to grow healthy and strong. Not too much western culture. Lifestyle and home life as islanders to be taught to them.’

The reduction in traditional cultural practice is viewed by some as having a direct impact on the health of the community, particularly in relation to gardening.

‘We have western kaikai in the store today. You have to balance with eating the right food. We have dugong oil to rub on you to make us tough and strong. My friends and I used to be rubbed by our athes all the time. I think that is why we are strong today.’

‘Kasava, sweet potatoes, pumpkins. Most kaikai is cooked in coconut milk. They don’t eat much of this kinds of food today, these were garden food. We spend more money in the shop for food today and these are western food not our kind of food when we are growing up. Sometimes you have to force kids to kaikai our food. Western influence in food is temptation this including sweets and lollies for our children.’

‘From a health perspective the non-use of bush medicine and more the white people influence is leading to higher rates of diabetes because of TV and lack of exercise.’

The loss of traditional language is an issue for many of those interviewed. While Creole is commonplace, language is not commonly used.

‘Not many speak here last Elder has gone. Common language used is Creole. Our grandparents used to speak language before. Language is lost also, majority speaks Creole. When I was growing up my parent never used to speak language, they used Creole more. I learnt some language when I got married to my husband family; his father taught me some words.’

Christian beliefs are strongly held by many on the islands who regularly attend church services. While Christianity is seen as compatible with traditional practice by some, others see it as accelerating the loss of culture.

‘Tradition and religion should run in parallel. Appreciate one another, respect one another.’

‘Yes very important to be Christian-like—go church on Sunday always. Teach them every day to be Christian, do the right thing.’

‘Religious influence outside has divided the community. Tension in the community because of it—make fun of our language.’

‘Early religion never impacted too much—for example, we went to church, but still practical to our culture ... last ten years losing culture fast because of religion.’



Theme 5: Role of services

The availability of services varies between the islands, and as such, there is a diversity of opinion in identifying the important issues. However, health care, communications and child care are common concerns, as are employment prospects for young people and their parents.

The following response is from a participant on Warraber regarding the impact of limited job opportunities.

‘Mainstream children have more than our children. CDEP [Community Development Employment Program] is not the only answer. Need encouragement to find career paths, parents change too. Government dependency changes thinking of parents.’

On Masig, there is acknowledgement that changes in technology and services have impacted on the local lifestyle.

‘Computer, communication, mobile phone, BRACS [Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme] station. Cargo comes in to the island once a month before, but now more frequent. Clothes, lifestyle has changed.’

‘Boat comes every fortnight. Diet, plane. If not on boat or in the shop you can order things on the plane. Freight can be put on the boat from Cairns.’

‘Mailing system is slow. But we have airline service that comes in all the time now. This is good for grocery to be delivered by Sky Tran which flies often from Cairns to Yorke direct.’

The resort on Masig was also discussed, with a bit of argument about whether businesses such as the resort created positive outcomes, as they provided employment for locals but brought strangers to the island who were not necessarily exposed to island culture.

The availability of health services is also a key issue and varies between the islands. At Poruma, participants said health care was very limited. On Masig and Warraber, respondents spoke of more services.

‘Services available now is health—for example, doctor, midwife service now—so this is good and much better.’

‘Vaccinations, hearing for kids. Before the clinic started, kids were seen by specialists down south. We are also starting a program to help pregnant mums.’

Child care availability is also varied, with many relying on family support. In Poruma, participants spoke of their expectations of early childhood programs in their child care facility.

‘We can measure their education and development from teaching in the home and would like to see more development coming out of child care.’

‘Teacher asked if my son knows how to use a scissors. Yes because he comes to the library where I work and uses scissors to cut. But from attending child care he can straight cut using the dotted lines.’

‘Child reminds me to wash hands, which makes me think twice when was the last time I washed my hands.’

Another woman described how she depends on the centre and sees it as the safe zone for child protection.

The participants also spoke of other facilities that they think will help them to enhance their children's development. Most ideas were focused around giving children more to do on the islands for recreation. The suggestions included skate parks, playgrounds and youth centres.



Discussion points

Throughout many of the discussions there is an emphasis on discipline and rules within the community and the household. It would be useful to know in more detail the rules that are considered important by the community and how discipline is usually administered. There are a number of references to physical punishment, but also some feeling that this is not always considered acceptable.

Christianity is strong on these islands, as it is in other clusters. However there appears to be more debate in this cluster over how it fits with traditional culture.

Surprisingly, what is not mentioned in this discussion is the impact of the policy of dry communities. While parents are concerned about children being exposed to drugs and alcohol when they are sent south for boarding school, it would be interesting to know how they think the alcohol bans impact on the raising of children.

There is some limited reference to feelings of shame amongst some residents to practising their traditional culture, or dressing in traditional ways. It would be of value to explore how the children view their cultural heritage and how it impacts on their sense of identity and self-esteem.

While the problems faced by the communities are explored, there is little reference to the advantages of island life for children. What does the community consider to be the most important benefits of growing up in the islands? What do they see as their particular strengths in raising children? How do they define success in parenting? The answers to these questions are helpful in determining what works for families and finding ways to build on those elements.

3.5 Kalalagal (western islands)



Badu and Moa

Badu and Moa are in the near western group of Torres Strait Islands, located about 50 kilometres north of Cape York. Badu, at 9.7 kilometres in diameter, is the smaller of the two islands. Moa, about 15 kilometres in diameter, is the second largest island in the Torres Strait. Both islands are hilly with soaring, steep-faced granite tors and large boulders. The undulating interiors of both islands support grassland and eucalyptus-dominated woodlands, interspersed with cycad and palm glades. The perimeter of Badu is fringed with extensive mangrove swamps. Moa has both rocky and sandy shorelines as well as some mangroves.

The three communities represented in the study are Badu community, Badu Island, population 825; Kubin community, population 210, located on the south side of Moa; and St Paul's community, population 350, located on the Moa's north side. A paved road connects Kubin and St Paul's communities on the opposite sides of the island. Reference is occasionally made to the now defunct village of Poid on the western side of Moa, opposite Badu.

Similarities of clans and social organisation support the tradition that Badu was originally settled from Mabuiag. Settlement of Moa appears to have been later; certainly some inhabitants of Poid came from Badu. Several younger participants from Kubin and St Paul's originated from other islands. As on Mabuiag, the near western islanders speak Kala Lagaw Ya which belongs to the Pama-Nyungan group of Australian languages.

Overview of findings

The personal stories of growing up on Moa and Badu Islands come primarily from older people who tell of how they were brought up in comparison with more recent generations.

There is a strong nostalgia for some of the formal aspects of family and community life combined with a vague sense of loss of certain cultural attributes and traditional means of social control.

Badu and Moa were among the last islands to have been missionised or colonised, but among the first to adopt a western entrepreneurial (competitive) approach to their economies. The advantages of improved nutrition, better communication, more intensive and prolonged schooling, money-based economy and steady employment, a stable source of income, household technology, electrical appliances, motor vehicle transport and outboard motors are clearly acknowledged, but they are also perceived to have many negative effects on the children's physical and behavioural wellbeing. Young people are also strongly influenced by media and many adopt American styles of dress and behaviour.

Education is valued and seen as the pathway to improved opportunities for children. There are a number of concerns about language. While the use of English is seen to erode traditional culture, it is also valued as a skill to enhance future employment.

Growing up in Badu and Moa revolves around the dynamics of the Torresian extended family concept, idealised by the view that 'every Torres Strait child is your own child'. Torres Strait Islander traditional adoption plays an important role in this cohesiveness. Unlike most other forms of adoption, the family bonds between the adoptee and parents are not severed; they are merely extended.

Underpinning the community is the concept of **respect**. Knowledge of tradition is an expression of respect for the culture. More specifically, respect reinforces the traditional roles of community Elders, grandparents, uncles and aunts and parents as it unfolds into proscriptive rules of reciprocity and obligation.

My island life—Kalalagal Teacher

'When I was a child in preschool my home was situated at the far end of the village [Badu] and the school was at the other end of the beach. I was the youngest of five sisters and brothers. We walked the beach to school and the learning was done in our home language.'

'Sometimes Elders told traditional stories, but mostly I played with my brothers, sisters and cousins in our cubby house or rolling around some big empty tanks. We played marbles under the shade of the mango trees; our house had many mango trees. In the afternoon five days a week, I went with Mum and Dad to do gardening and collect firewood.'

'Our house was so huge, that people from New Guinea came to visit us and brought food down with them. We would have a feast together and dance. When Dad was working on the lugger, granddad would tell us the stories. We never knew when he was going to be home, so we kept an eye out for him. When we could see that it was father for sure, we would run towards him and he had strings of dry shell meat one for each. When Dad was home we went out and collected wongais and buried them in the sand and would go back after a day or two to pick them out of the sand.'





'We moved to Kubin from Badu. Even though I missed family and friends at Badu, I quickly made new friends at Kubin. My parents were farmers and kept the lifestyle from Badu. We continued gardening, had chickens and ducks. I collected the eggs and distributed them to the families.'

'There were fun days at the beach where we ate dugong, turtle and kupmari. I spent most of the time playing, eating and swimming. At the Kubin turtle farm we would come and help the extended family. Mum would send us there to help and to get to know each other.'



'Later I had to go on a boat to Thursday Island and was very sad about leaving home. Attending high school was different and I didn't know anyone there, only non-Indigenous teachers. I lived with my Dad's sister on Thursday Island and I got to know some of my other cousins. Eventually I met many people and made new friends at high school.'

'When I look back and reflect I realise that everything is there for them. The children would have a poor understanding of how I worked and struggled, as the children of today have everything they want.'



'The lifestyle, it needs to come from the family: it needs to be taught. The lifestyle of today's children is different. They have two roles—they can easily choose to be part of island life or the other which is western society. I think if they choose to be part of being the new changes, then they accept the changes and they will never come back. If they are taught the traditional values at home, then they are more likely to come back.'

'There have been some improvements in the lifestyle, better health care, maybe better nutrition, better education, but at the same time, today's food is being processed too much and is not fresh. When I was growing up as a child, we were eating dugong and turtle and vegetables fresh from the garden. Our children need to be taught.'

'I am a giver and enjoy giving because I was taught love and respect. I enjoy being a mum and have raised a number of children outside my extended family. I love being with my children.'



Themes

Theme 1: Starting out—the early years of life

The extended family is the keystone of Torres Strait Island communities and has an important bearing on the way children are nurtured and taught. People on Badu and Moa are proud of and open about their traditional interfamilial adoption practices or ‘Kupai Omasker’, as it is sometimes called.

The majority of people interviewed indicated that they been raised at different times by various members of their extended families, sometimes locally and sometimes in other communities on other islands. Grandparents are often the primary guardians. It is customary that a young mother’s first born might be given to her parents. Aunts and uncles also figure prominently as primary adopted parents or as secondary guardians at a later stage. The strong bonds of the extended family are frequently emphasised as essential elements in growing up in the Torres Strait Islands.

‘Badu holistic: every Torres Strait child is your own child.’

‘We live in a small community, we look after each other. Often there is adoption.’

‘It’s a small community; we still look after each other’s children. It’s genetic. We grow up under Mum and Dad’s wings being a big family.’

‘It is an island custom to give the first born baby to your mother and father. There’s an issue of telling who the real mother and father is, and it’s very sensitive.’

‘If she’s my sister with no baby, I’d give the baby to my sister.’

‘While the mother is pregnant, we give the baby away.’

Parental grandparents are considered to be ‘softer’, gentler and more loving. They tend to ‘spoil’ the children. However there is also a differing view among some people, particularly Elders, who considered their parents (probably the grandparents) to be very strict regarding matters around the household. Discipline is a family affair.

‘Aunties and uncles—they’re the first ones parents ask for help [in difficult times] ...’

‘The community helps grow up kids. Sometimes if the children are too cheeky, uncle and aunty help the parents by disciplining the children.’

‘The family shares responsibility when a child gets into trouble. Different families bring him up. There is a family link. All groups of family carry the burden.’

‘In our culture every child belongs to us. They call me Atei and they look up to me. I’m a role model for them. I teach them culture, talk in language to them so that they can learn and understand the language.’

While families share responsibility for the care of young children, playgroups, day care services and preschool programs were considered convenient and educationally beneficial, although expensive.

‘It is good. They have prayer for food first. It’s a good service for working parent.’

‘Both my wife and I work ... these are hard times for parenting.’

However, some parents point to the playgroups, day care and preschool as sources of ‘bad language’ (use of Creole and swearing).

‘We don’t speak English at child care. In my 10 years of experience at child care, we don’t have any behavioural problems, only when the children go to preschool. I have gone into the preschool to observe the children’s behaviour and noticed the difference in the way the teachers communicate in English; some of our brighter children were having behavioural problems. When the teachers first start them [in] English, that was a problem.’

Many of the participants compared the lifestyle of today’s young children with that of their own childhood when there was a stronger focus on working, particularly in the garden, cleaning and helping to care for younger brothers and sisters.

‘After school we work in the garden. My father would tell us when to play.’

‘In my day my father was very strict. If I didn’t work, I didn’t eat.’



Theme 2: Growing up—school years

Among older parents, the family is considered to be the stronghold for the education and activities of small children. Now it appears that many activities, once entirely in the domain of the extended family, are community activity-based or related to the school programs. Boarding school on the mainland, apprenticeships, traineeships, TAFE and university may now take some of the roles of uncles and aunts in providing discipline and life skills in the older children.

‘As a teenager, when I went to boarding school, it was a cultural shock, the expectations that were placed upon us at boarding school compared to growing up at home—more regimented and everything structured for you. At home it was a family upbringing and the expectations were different, growing with the family was supervised but not regimented.’

Western island children are often moved during their high school years. In the past, children from St Paul’s, Kubin and Badu were sent to Thursday Island and lived with aunts and uncles and cousins.

‘Later I had to go on a boat to Thursday Island and I was very sad about leaving home. Attending high school was different and I didn’t know anyone there, only non-Indigenous teachers. I lived with my Dad’s sister in Thursday Island and got to know some of my other cousins.’

In more recent times they might attend boarding school in Cairns or Townsville.

‘In 1980 we went to Cairns. I hadn’t spoken English until I was in year 6 and I had to adapt to city life.’



There are many concerns about how language affects children’s education and cultural identity. Older people stressed that children should only speak English during school hours. Conversation in ‘language’ should not be allowed and ‘bad’ [swearing] language was to be discouraged altogether. During the interviews, the younger adults of Moa and Badu spoke English.

In less formal situations and among themselves, Moa and Badu younger adults freely chat in Torres Strait Creole and English and occasionally in Kala Lagaw Ya. English is a second language among people educated in the 1950s or before, whereas many younger adults are fluently bilingual or trilingual. Some, who were brought up in Cairns and have returned to Badu, speak English as a first language and are learning Kala Lagaw Ya and Creole.

However, parents agreed on the importance of young children learning English in school and see it as an essential factor in their child’s future success. However, there is a strongly held opinion that local languages should be taught in the home and should not be prohibited or discouraged, as in the past. Creole is frequently heard spoken among the children of Moa and Badu.



‘Kala Lagaw Ya first language, Creole two, number three English; mine just English ‘cause brought up in Cairns, but starting to understand.’

‘In our culture every child belongs to us. I teach them culture, talk in language to them so they can learn and understand the language. I also teach the white teachers our language so they can be part of our culture and understand what we talk about.’

‘My Dad pushed me into getting a good education. He was always telling me to do my best at school. He would sit me at the table and read my report card to me. When I speak English he would tell me “don’t speak English, this is a black community”.’

‘Do not use language in the school yard. They try to teach us English, both cultures to guide; we sing songs in English and language.’

Parents’ aspirations for their children can be divided into three basic responses. The more typical response is that they should be able to do whatever they decide to do. Conversely, a few parents and grandparents have quite specific vocations in mind for their children. Skills and trades well established in the region (for example, airplane pilot, boat pilot or captain, mechanic, diesel fitter, plumber, builder) or occasionally, football player or artist, are typical ideas. Several respondents were primarily concerned with their children’s citizenship in the community. Respect, ‘ilan pasin’ [generosity], affiliation with the church and maintenance of cultural values are the most important expectations.

‘My hope is for my children to be taught love and respect. I raised them up the way my parents grew me up. My children will make their own choices as they grow older. I want them to have a better education. I believe in what I was taught and call this knowledge my “treasure box”. I have never given up telling these stories to my children. I give this picture all the time of how I see and value this world.’

‘I want my son to be a pilot to fly Aerotropics plane.’

‘I ask my child he wants to be a captain belongs to the steamer. Football player. It’s up to the parents to bring that out.’

‘Talk to the young boys and get the skills—mechanics, plumber, be involved in training.’

‘Children are good with computers and they teach me.’

‘Attending theological college ...’

‘My focus is manners, education and respect.’

‘Whatever they decide to do. My Mum and the boys guide me in the right direction. I want my children to have a normal life, to enjoy it, and to not get carried away by what is being said by other people. Look at it as a new day, get up and go and put on a smile.’

‘I want my children to do what ever they are able to do—in regards to fulfilling their dreams in who they want to be and whatever they want to do in life. We’re there for their support.’

My growing years

Elder

'I always go to church to worship and come back home again. I always welcome people to my house, because I enjoy doing that. I worry to go back to Kubin to catch up with my families because I miss them. I sew and tidy my house and send my children to school each day. I look after myself, my son moved in with me with the granddaughter. His wife is working at the Central Islands.

'I looked after my children by myself. It's hard work to grow children up. You waste sleep and must understand what the child want. Sometimes I get tired but I always try my best. I also looked after my husband's families' children. When the children grow up, I do not use stick, I use my mouth to discipline them to do the right thing. We cut the trees along the drain and in the current football oval. My children and I cut the grass along the bridge so that I can see my grandson come home from school. Other children in the community come over to my house to clean and rake up my yard. I give them \$5 for them and some lolly.

'The children have good time with me. I love children. Kubin families come and stay with me. Eastern Island families come and stay with me. I love island dancing at parties or weddings; I always dance by myself and then the other women come and join me dancing on the field. I dress up myself beautifully. I am a happy and cheerful person and enjoy singing. I am a happy mother.'



Theme 3: Family role

Family bonds on Badu and Moa are especially strong and secured by the ideal of **respect**—respect for the Elders, respect for the children, respect for everyone's place in the community. Respect is more than politeness. It is reinforced by the code of family honour and the actions of pivotal role models, such as the uncles in carrying out important ceremonial events in the family (wedding arrangements, tombstone). Finally there is a strong sense of obligation reinforced by the adoption system. The extended family is united by a strong sense of honour and obligation.

'I love sports, especially football. I was invited to join the All-Blacks; but at about the time I was to leave, my cousin asked me to be his best man at his marriage, so I had to choose to go to football or go to Darnley for the wedding. I decided to go to Darnley and stayed there.'

'There are few Elders left and it's a young community at St Paul's. The older ones make and talk about the family connections. The younger ones don't know. That's how we survive; the Kris families come together. The Pedro families come together and talk about family connections, how we are related to each other. Your piccaninnies build bridges across the Torres Strait by knowing who their relations are.'

'Look after grandmother at home. They grow me up, now it's my turn to look after them.'

The roles of uncles and aunts are numerous with duties in arranging marriages and tombstone ceremonies and as important role models for children.

'When children are young they are taught to swim, dive, spear fish and hunt ... these things are taught [by the uncles] before you get married ... even for shaving when the child is 18 or so, the uncle has to shave him. Aunty is there to see and parents and family. Uncle will teach the boy to spear a turtle or dugong and this is called initiation, zugurngapai.'

'When the boy catches his first turtle or dugong, the women (aunties) will dress up, sometimes with breasts hanging loose and all dressed up—they would go to the parents house and dance around the parents, slap them with branches. Sometimes the parents hide because they don't want to be flogged, but in our culture they hunt down the parents and flog them.'

'In our culture when want to get engaged, someone call aunty and uncle to agree. Uncle asks girl's parents to go in and then he can talk to the girl. The uncle has to ask permission. When the parents say yes, the uncle goes back and lets the boy's parents know and then the uncle has to organise the feasting for the engagement party....'

'It is the uncle's duty to teach to hunt, what is right and what is wrong and their obligation.'

'If an older person talks, you must sit and listen. By going to school, you know your rights. When your uncle says you must do it, then you must do it. But now they are losing respect for the Elders. Now by going to school, the children know their rights and they know that they cannot be punished. Before time parent give consent to smack children at school. They know the rules, respect the Elders and teachers.'

The adoption of American popular culture from television, video movies and recorded music is seen to be undermining family values. Older people are concerned about a loss of respect, the replacement of the traditional language by Creole, the loss of the work ethic, and competitiveness strongly imbued on Badu families during the Tanu Nona era from 1930 to 1960. They are worried also by cheeky attitudes and backchat, limitations on discipline imposed by government rules ('the kids know their rights...'), and young people's dependency on television and video games for entertainment.

‘The children adopt other cultures from the TV shows. In our times there was no TV. We would drive motorbikes. Children today are not independent. They are dependent children who sit in front of the TV.’



Theme 4: Cultural influences

Attending ceremonies and learning about traditional culture is vigorously encouraged within the community. Traditional dancing, singing, crafts, and language are highly valued and an important aspect of cultural identity, rights and recognition.

‘Give us back our customary laws, give us back our traditional lore, traditional land—rights to sea country. Give us back our way of disciplining children—child protection act. Our language is important. Curriculum to the school. Our language should be taught in schools. Give us back what is rightfully ours.’

Ceremony and traditional culture also bring together families and promote respect.

‘I grow him up to be spiritual and physical. Show him respect and I do not swear in front of him, drink or argue.’

‘It is taught in homes and parents are the first teachers and then the church. Mum teaches manners, we have the straightening of the branch while it is still green. Grandparents teach values and respect.’

‘Youth don’t understand where grandparents are coming [from], and roles for death and burial ceremonies comes back to respect and family ties for environment, the sea, totems.’

There are concerns about the influence of western popular culture on young people’s cultural identity, response to discipline, personal attitude and health. Study participants also cited a combination of government initiatives (Community Development Employment Program support, Department of Community Services’ rulings on discipline and residence), and the relative affluence and economic independence of teenagers, unemployment, and the impact of rapid communication and entertainment by electronic media.

‘White man takes away the lifestyle. You can die of hunger! There’s water there but you can die of thirst and you can bleed to death and no one takes notice of you. You put bread and yam side by side and they jump over the yam to get the bread. Young people wait for the barge. Before time we did gardening. Elders, we still gardening.’

‘The children are too heavily into the western influence. To explain from the long past why ceremonials were performed to give thanks. My research gives information on why people were healthy and strong. People are not well because of the food. Children are Americanised. Gardening was the basis of survival. We are heavily relying on stuff that is shipped by the barge. Our people are not very well educated about the damage that [that kind of] food would do to you.’

‘There is a general feeling that culture is fading. Culture is always changing, but there have been huge impacts from wider travelling and exposure to TV. When something goes wrong and you’re trying to explain to a kid about their culture, you get goose bumps on your hand.’

Young people on the islands have access to status items such as mobile phones, video games and trendy clothing.

‘Lots of music—children copy and listen to other music and sometimes I get angry because the music is so loud. I grew up with island dancing where everyone come together and have a good time.’

‘I reckon on this island [Badu] and on Kubin that we can withstand the western influence. You can see the influence from the TV, music, games, yankee [pop culture].’

‘There is a problem with western influence—TV, music and reggae. The news affects older people like what’s happening in the world, like global warming. The younger people tend to know about the small things like terrorist bombings. In my time we listened to reggae. Today the kids go overboard, decorate their rooms, dress like and want to be like Bob Marley.’

‘Today’s children see things on TV and they want to try it out, listening to their peers at school, they’ll take a puff, a fag or a taste.’

Most of the older Baduans and Moans are practicing Christians who regularly attend church services. Some interviewees are pastors or members of church committees. Some of the younger participants said that they supported or respected the church but no longer attended the services. Several interviewees are service providers, teachers or members of voluntary community services and committees.



It is widely acknowledged that the church has less authority over people than before, but no one expressed a desire for re-establishing that authority. Elders observed that there is 'no more wedding' in reference to the previously more complex arrangements and agreements involving parental and church consent, bride price, and so on, but the church remains central to funeral, tombstone and Easter commemorations.

It is recognised that Christian values and morals replaced the previous belief system, much of which is now lost, but some kustom, such as 'ilan pasin', traditional stories, songs and dancing, and totemic and legendary figures are woven into the fabric.

'Very important. I grew up into culture and religion. Religion is teaching from the bible. On the cultural side, the story of Gelam, he left Moa and his mother turned into a rock. When you see these rocks, you know the legends are true.'

'In my family the father talks to the boys and I talk to the girls. My husband is the head of the household and in the Christian manner, teaching respect comes from both of us ... Fathers, mothers, grandfathers—footsteps from our ancestors—we will always relate back. Religion plays an important part in our lives. My father is a choir, my Dad is a bellman, my grandfather is a choir.'

'Religion is important. We've lost some of our culture. The scary thing is the western influence.'

'My father's totem is the snake and my mother's is the stingray. My spiritual focus is on God. My totem is not important to me.'

'Religion plays a big role. In recent years we have had different types of religion and it has split the communities, but now we are sharing strategies and getting the different denominations together. Elders talk about the importance of going to church and of the bible. When they have an opportunity to share, they see the consistency.'



My culture Elder

'Good things from the past were hunting for turtle, attending church and participating in religious activities like Easter and Rogation, and also dancing for these festivities.'

'Not so good things were the unreliable water supply. We rowed dinghies to get water, washed at the creeks and carried the water in pails on our shoulders.'

'Food came from gardening and there wasn't enough rice and flour. Gardening was done by everyone in the family. There was no machinery, only pick and shovel.'

'You want to know everything for your life's end—learn to drive, learn to pilot the plane, learn to captain. I grew up with an Indigenous teacher who told me "if you want something you take my word: money comes to you any time".'

'Now children copy bad language [Creole] from each other. In the old days, it is the chairman and councillors who gives good advice and the police take the letters to the parents to let them know about their child's wrong-doing. If there is too much trouble in the community like drinking alcohol, he would be sent off the island to another community to be disciplined. In my growing up there wasn't enough food and water. Children didn't go to school and there was no money and there was no pension or family assistance payments.'

'To eliminate problems with families, ideas were shared among communities from councillors to help support them. Talking to children about life before, stories and legends: the significance of story of Goba, which talks about the battle between the Badu warriors. Taking children to places of where it occurred, the cave and grave site and stories of how the Wongai came to the island and also the coconut and the almond nut.'



Theme 5: Role of services

Badu, Kubin and St Paul's communities have basic services and venues for community activities. These include police, health and family services; after school care and preschool programs; prep schools; council chambers; town halls; and sporting venues. Respondents identified a number of issues in the provision of services, most notably shortfalls in funding, lack of training and insufficient numbers of qualified staff (playgroup, child care).

'Concern for quality of service, not trained staff, must have blue card. When you look at it, why should I have a blue card, because it's our children? We need money to get resources and staff need training.'

Services are also challenged by the need to travel to the mainland for training and certification and a lack of variety in programs. However, there is a high level of voluntary participation and a great deal of discussion and strategic planning among service providers and volunteers.

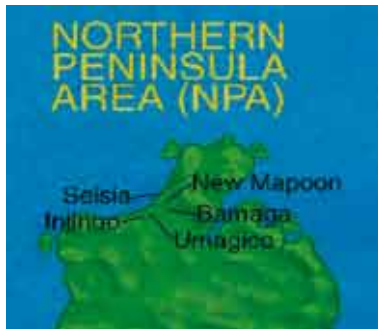


Discussion points

The stories from Moa and Badu reflect the resilience, pride and intelligence of Australians who grew up in relative isolation during difficult and historically tumultuous times. Despite hardships, poverty, danger, and complex and changeable social arrangements, all reported enjoyable and challenging childhoods, seemingly filled with adventure. There were very few references to boredom, disadvantages, and discrimination or suffering, though surely these were not entirely missing experiences.

There are clearly concerns from the older people about how younger children are developing today. The growing influence of western culture is resulting in a weakening of the embrace of traditional culture by younger people—the effects of that change warrant further exploration. It also coincides with a lessening in the influence of Christian churches—again, particularly amongst younger people.

3.6 Northern Peninsula Area



The Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) is situated at the top of Cape York Peninsula. This area, also known as the 'Far North', consists of five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Three are Aboriginal communities — Injinoo, Umagico and New Mapoon — and two are Torres Strait Islander communities — Bamaga and Seisia. The total population of the region is approximately 2,500.

Injinoo

The community of Injinoo is located on the north-western side of the Cape York Peninsula. Injinoo is the homeland of most of the traditional owners of all the land on which the five NPA communities are situated.

Although self-sufficient, through fishing and gardening, the community made requests to the Anglican Church to establish a mission and school. Government officials allowed the community to function through an elected council. After the Second World War, which saw a considerable military presence in the area, many Torres Strait Islanders began moving into Injinoo. Settlements were subsequently built at Bamaga, New Mapoon and Umagico to accommodate relocated people from other areas of the cape.

Umagico

The Umagico community is located north of the New Mapoon community on the eastern side of the Cape York Peninsula. The Umagico Community was established in the early 1960s on Injinoo's market garden site when people were moved up from Lockhart River and Lower Cape York Peninsula. More recent arrivals have settled from Kubin on Moa and other Torres Strait Islands.

New Mapoon

The New Mapoon community is located in the Northern Peninsula Area of Far North Queensland. The people who live at New Mapoon were forcibly moved from Marpuna (Old Mapoon) in the early 1960s to accommodate mining expansion on their traditional country. They now have historical association and administrative responsibility for a Deed of Grant in Trust area on the traditional country of the Gudang people. The residents of New Mapoon have a ranger service, which works closely with the Injinoo and other Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) community rangers to undertake land management practices in the NPA.

Bamaga

Bamaga is located 25 kilometres from the tip of Cape York Peninsula and 56 kilometres north of the Jardine River. It lies 5 kilometres from the coast and is approximately 900 kilometres from Cairns on the Cape York Development Road.

Bamaga was founded in 1947 when the people of Saibai Island in the Torres Strait were relocated due to water shortage and fear of flooding. The Saibai islanders initially landed at Muttee Heads and established the township of Bamaga in 1949.

Bamaga has predominantly Torres Strait Islander population of approximately 700 people with a further 300 temporary non-island residents.

Bamaga provides the following services:

- primary and preschool
- high school
- day care centre
- TAFE facility
- Queensland University of Technology outreach centre
- post office
- police station
- courthouse
- Department of Natural Resources
- Home and Community Care
- social security and Centrelink agent
- bakery
- Queensland Health—Primary Health Care Centre and hospital
- swimming pool
- community centre—indoor basketball court
- gym
- nursery
- resort
- QBuild (Queensland Department of Public Works)
- State Emergency Service.

Seisia

Seisia lies on the coast, west of Bamaga. The township has a predominantly Torres Strait Islander population of approximately 200 people. Seisia was established when the Torres Strait Islander residents of Red Island Point separated from Bamaga and founded their own community. Seisia is an acronym from the first letter of the names of the families who established the community.

The community is well known for its tourism industry. Tourists embark on the area either over land by 4WD during the dry season between the months of May to October or by ferry service from Thursday Island. The community provides the following services:

- supermarket
- service station
- camping ground
- accommodation units
- restaurant and kiosk
- travel booking office
- abattoir and butchery
- cattle farm
- stevedoring facility.



Overview of findings

Babies born into the communities in the Northern Peninsula Area are welcomed by an extended family network who are actively involved with the raising of the child. Family support is seen as an important factor for the baby's development.

All but one of the communities in the NPA were established when Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people were relocated from their original settlements. This has resulted in a crossover between the cultures, with many adopting both Torres Strait and Aboriginal traditions. Culture is seen as critical in helping children to grow up strong. Participants believe culture equips their young people with a strong sense of identity and with the tools for survival.

However, there are widespread concerns that the young people are disinterested in traditional cultures and are more influenced by western culture. Instead of gardening and household chores, children avidly watch TV and DVDs, listen to music, walk the streets or chat on their mobile phones. Alcohol and drug abuse is also a growing problem.

Another key issue is the lack of respect shown by young people to their parents and community Elders. There is a feeling that young people are not disciplined and some say this is partly due to children being aware of their individual rights. Many children are raised by their grandparents, particularly their grandmother, with support from parents and aunties and uncles. This is a result of the traditional island practice of intra-family adoptions and is seen to enhance intergenerational learning.

While education services are available and comparatively accessible in the NPA—particularly with the provision of a high school—participants highlighted the problem of non-attendance. This is despite daily bus transport to all communities. Issues were raised about bullying and some tension between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Themes

Theme 1: Starting out—the early years of life

Many of the children living in the Northern Peninsula Area are born in a hospital on Thursday Island or in Cairns. Following their birth, the family returns to the community where follow up postnatal care and baby clinics are provided by the Queensland Health service in Bamaga.

The baby may remain with the birthing mother or may, under ‘island adoption’, be given to the grandmother or a relative. The baby’s upbringing is primarily the mother’s responsibility with strong support and advice from the immediate and extended family.

‘I had the best of both worlds. My upbringing was with my grandmother and later with my parents. I come from a family of 14 children. My real mother is my big sister. She had me when she was 18 years old—a daughter and granddaughter to my grandparents, but I was a daughter to them [grandparents] not a granddaughter. I didn’t accept my birth mother as my mother, my true mother was grandmother. My mother tried to take me back but I said no, you are not my mother. I became a rebellious child because of the conflict. I didn’t want to have anything to do with her though she and my Dad often visited. At home language was mostly spoken during my growing up. Everything my grandmother said was in language.’

‘Grew up in Cairns. Dad died when I was nine, then [my Mum] met my stepdad. Spent lots of time with grandmother, also raised by all aunties and one uncle.’

Parental and family support are seen as an important factor for the babies’ development and some participants identified that babies need a caring and loving environment in order to grow up strong and healthy.

‘Lots of love and care and security.’

‘Caring and loving environment. Hugs and kisses. They hold them. Well most of the people I have seen they been loving their kids for most of their life right up until they are adults, and some of them they grow up and they short of money and their Mum and Dad back them up.’

Although the focus group discussions included a few young mothers with infants, older mothers told most of the stories included in this section.

Theme 2: Growing up—school years

'It was a hard life for us'

Phyllis was born on Thursday Island and grew up in Umagico with her sister and brother. Her parents were from Lockhardt and moved to the community in the early 1960s. At the time there were only three houses in the community and each family shared the accommodation.

Phyllis describes her growing up years as being very hard for her family. Food was delivered to the NPA communities once a month, so families had to store their supplies. There was no electricity so most of the food either rotted or was eaten by rats. Many of the families had gardens to supplement the monthly food supply. Kerosene lamps provided light.

Phyllis attended kindergarten, primary and secondary school in Bamaga. She recalls how her Mum would walk with the kids from Umagico to school in Bamaga and would sit under the pine trees and wait for school to finish. Other times, they would catch a lift on the big work truck to Bamaga. When school was finished the family would return home and help their mother with household chores. As Phyllis recalls:

'We used to just play around the house and don't go to other places. Only weekend we go down camping and do all that. But now there is TV and there is everything'.

When Phyllis completed secondary school (grade 10) she stayed in Umagico for two years, then left to attend business college for a year. Phyllis always wanted to be a nurse or a health worker. She commenced work as a nurse aide with the Department of Community Services and is now the Health Centre Manager for the Umagico Primary Health Care Centre.

Phyllis has four children and two grandchildren. She believes parents need to be strong for their children. They need to be supportive and good role models. Phyllis also believes the bond between the child and the grandparent is extremely important.

Phyllis is now planning to enrol in a tertiary institution to achieve her next goal, an undergraduate degree.



In the NPA, apart from Injinoo, the other communities were established when Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people were relocated from their original settlements. There were no shops, bitumen roads, 4WDs, electricity, ferry service or phone. Food was shipped in by cargo boat every month or families relied on their own garden produce. Much of the stored food was destroyed by rot or by vermin; hence the garden produce and hunting was an important source of nutrition and survival. Families tended their own gardens and also shared the fruit and vegetables. A kerosene lamp supplied light and transport was mostly on foot. With no electricity to power washing machines, televisions or to boil the kettle, children on a daily basis helped with many of the household chores. When jobs were completed, many of the children played outdoors.

Over time, the population has grown in each community. There are more houses, religions, vehicles, stores, canteens, schools and televisions. A council office exists in each community as well as a Primary Health Care Centre. The councils employ most people under the Community Development Employment Program, where they work one week out of the fortnight. Government departments such as Queensland Health, Australian Quarantine Inspection Service, Department of Primary Industries, Centrelink and the Queensland Education Department also provide jobs. There are also some small businesses that are involved in the fishing industry or cater for the tourists who visit in the dry season (May to October).

Instead of gardening and doing household chores, children now watch TV or DVDs, listen to music, walk the streets, chat on their mobile phones, visit the activities' centres or gossip with friends. A few children and young people still enjoy having fun outdoors.

'No gardening today, only shop. More easy walk in shop, buy 'em and then out. That's why them kids don't grow up strong, 'cause no garden, they keep go shop.'

'They [children and young people] listen to radio, DVD and TV. They want to try and copy what they see. But before time, we just stay at home and go to school.'

'Some of the kids that don't go to the activity centre go up to Bamaga or Mapoon and act like ringers and steal them horses. They go everywhere on them horses, they come down to the scrub and they ride bareback.'



For some of the communities, holiday programs are organised such as ‘Rumble in the Jungle’, where the kids go camping, swimming, fishing or learn to dance.

‘We got that activities centre here. During the holidays they do programs with the kids they take about two weeks sometimes.’

‘All kind things—swimming, fishing, dancing team.’

However, many participants believe western influences such as TV, DVDs, shops, cars and music have changed community life and have had a negative impact on children and young people in the community. They described how children and young people were mimicking what they saw and heard in the movies and in music.

‘They [children and young people] do them things now, they look all ad and movie, and they think, I can do that too. All that violence, smoking, drugs, break in and sex. They think they can do it. They start at an early age. Too early.’

‘They [children] might look and they want to try and follow the people. Sometimes mother send ‘em go or father send ‘em go fridge to get beer. Then, that kid think, I’ll try that one day, just like my Dad.’

Alcohol and drugs have also had an impact on the community. Younger participants in the groups confirmed that their peers mostly stayed at home and either smoked drugs, drank alcohol, watched DVDs, walked around the community until late at night, or sat around gossiping. Although these communities are part of the Cape York Alcohol Management Plan, participants stated small kids and young people still had access to drinks such as light beer and passion pop. An older participant in the group stated in earlier times drinking alcohol was not permitted. Under the ‘Dog Act’ if the police caught you drinking they would put you in jail for the night. This punishment stopped many from drinking.

‘No such thing here [Alcohol Management Plan], they still find a way to do anything. You can’t take it away, they find another way to do anything like sniffing and spraying.’

‘Passion pop, all small kids speak all big kids to go and buy them drink.’

‘Hardly any go school. They just run around.’

However, one participant stated there have been other changes since the restrictions. In one community parents did not drink any more and spent more time with their children, especially on the weekends.

‘Good things, especially fathers. Before they work, work, work, then Friday comes, bang, they bust their pay on alcohol, they don’t get food and they end up fighting with their missus and then they take off and end up drinking for the whole weekend. Some bash up their missus and that. But now it’s changed a lot. The ones that don’t drink they settle down a lot. New house, job.’



Lack of discipline was also cited as a reason why many children found themselves on the wrong side of the tracks. Many of the older participants stated that discipline was an important part of growing up. It kept them on the right track and taught them right from wrong. For most, discipline meant a hiding, a smack, the belt or the cane.

‘We got brought up before, we get smacked for doing the wrong thing. Today, we can’t discipline our kids ‘cause we get locked up. They get so spoilt now. It’s not like we been raised before.’

‘Yeah, it was different from today. I grew up in a pretty strict family, always do your chores. If you don’t do your homework, you don’t get to go here or there.’

All participants believed that children today did not show respect to their parents or their Elders because they were not disciplined. Younger participants in the group confirmed that children and young kids in the community have become very ‘strong headed’ and did not respect their Elders or parents. In the past, children greeted their Elders or older relations as ‘Athe’, ‘Aka’, ‘Aunt’ or ‘Uncle’. They listened to what the Elders had to say and did as they were told. But today, there is no respect.

‘Teens today have less responsibilities. They know their rights from DOCS [Department of Community Services]. There are more social influences. There were rights before, but not spoken. White laws put there, not enough being told [about how they work or what they mean]. Now you can’t tell them kids anything because they already know everything; 8–10 year olds telling parents what to do. Young people know more than older people. If young kids have adopted these things they think it’s okay. They always gossip on mobile phones—“newspaper community”. Parents are not teaching their kids properly. There is not enough cultural influence.’

‘If you call someone now, they answer you, “wanem”. Before, we have to say, “Yes, Mum or Dad”.’

‘Some of them kids next door to me walk pass to go to school and they call out “Good morning Athe”. That’s good! I say, “Good morning”. Them one that walk pass you and don’t say anything, they don’t respect you.’

‘All kids don’t call you Aka or Athe, they only use first name, even if you older than them.’

Parents felt they could not discipline their children because of the child protection laws. Participants stated awareness programs were being conducted at the schools to educate children about their rights. As a result of these programs children were described as being 'strong headed' and refused to listen to their parents or Elders.

'I reckon this thing now, when you hit your kid, big trouble. That one [child protection law] make kid more silly. Them kid say, if I don't go school, mother and father can't hit me. Some time when you talk for small kid 'em answer you, "F ... you".'

'Today at school, they going to school and they get told about their rights. There is someone or program going to school telling kids. So when they come home if you say you can't go there or you can't have this, they say to us, we going to report you to police or family services. We don't want to stay with you. You try to be a good parent and you want to raise your children like you been raised, but today, that law is just ridiculous for them kids.'

'Well the first teacher are the parents. Today, now, if you hit your kid, you go court. That's what makes them kid strong head because they say, "if you hit me, you go jail".'



Other participants described how they have found alternate methods for disciplining their children, such as talking or demonstrating good and bad behaviour, but also expressed that these methods were easy for mums with one or two children but much more difficult for mothers with eight or more children.

'We teach them at an early age what is right and wrong. If they did something wrong and we know it is not right and they get in trouble, we ask them for their hand and we give them a rap over their hand. We teach them to have respect for other people, to take correction from other families. We also teach them about abuse, what body parts people should not touch.'

'Now we can't hit our kid, we have rules. If my kids like playing with X Box or spending the weekend with friend we just stop them for doing these things. So next time when they think about doing something wrong, first they think, my Mum and Dad will stop me from doing them thing I like, so I won't do it.'

'I sometime see them parents snarling and yelling at them kids. I think when you talk like that, say them words you not supposed to say when you snarl and yell, that will drive the child from you. With my kids I believe you must have calm and peace. You have to talk to them.'

However, whilst discipline and respect were highlighted as important to helping children grow strong, participants also stated that parents and the community needed to demonstrate responsibility, be good role models, show community support and retain their culture.



Theme 3: Family role

Bamaga resident

Beverly grew up in Bamaga amongst a very supportive family. Her aunts, in particular, played a strong part in Beverly's upbringing.

'You could always talk to the aunts. It was more open. You would know what to say and when to say it.'

She helped her parents with household chores such as cleaning, sweeping, washing the clothes and bringing in wood for the stove. In her young days there was lots of respect and cultural teaching. Children were taught to do things the family way. Values and respect were important and were based around the family's religious beliefs. Children would always respect others, especially their elders and were taught to speak to their elders in language, which was considered formal and respectful. For entertainment, Beverly would go walking in the bush and swimming in the creeks. Beverly describes the community as being open and friendly and there was an understanding that each yard was open to everyone. She played with the kids around the block and describes the early days as being 'fun days'. Her family and friends would eat mangoes and spend all day building a cubby house. They would follow the trails down to the creek and go exploring.

'There were lots of activities to do such as walking to the store to get groceries for auntie. It was 8 kilometres but we loved to go, there were no complaints. We used to walk from Mapoon to Seisia to go fishing. We would catch sardines and cook them on the spot. Towards Christmas swimming was popular.'

Now, Beverly, a single parent, believes parenting has changed. She describes how she learnt her parenting skills from her parents and from her own life.



'Parenting is hard work. Children's rights have been introduced and parents must decide by themselves how to raise their young.'

Beverly also believes 'new trends' are some of the reasons for the change. In her day, they were not allowed to go to the canteen and were rarely exposed to drugs. Today, alcohol, drugs and technology have affected children and young adults. Teenagers are drinking in the community and have become uncontrollable. Kids have more freedom to travel between the Cape, Thursday Island and Cairns. There is vandalism, kids walking the street and damaging property for fun. Today children are speaking more Creole and are disrespectful. When Beverly was young, children knew when to interrupt adults talking. Now, they just interrupt and say 'Mum I want.'

'Today's kids just cut in on a conversation. They have no manners. I would not butt in on my Mum's conversations.'

Beverly believes a source of problem is teenage boredom. Recreational pastimes have changed. Activities need to attract and maintain the interest of children and young people.

'We used to spend time on the hills depending on when the berries were ripe. Today, if I ask my children, they say no way, I'm not walking.'

Today, Beverly aims to do what is best for her children. She understands the hardships of living in a remote community and she hopes to make a better life for her son and daughter. Beverly is a strong believer in how she was raised and tries to encourage her children to be good, to have respect, to learn about their culture and language, and to meet other people. She also encourages open discussions with her children, to explain why decisions are made and to provide advice from her experience. Beverly hopes her children will be independent. She hopes they learn about other things, but most importantly that they get to know themselves.



In the Northern Peninsula Area, many of the families are related mostly due to intermarriage. In earlier times, when the population in each community was small, families were reported to be very close and shared everything. The role of the immediate and extended family ranged from caring for the child's health and wellbeing to teaching them how to behave in a respectful manner. Parents and Elders had a responsibility to be good role models. However, as described by one participant, trying to be parent and a good role model did not guarantee that your child would follow in your footsteps.

'All the adults in the house, the whole family are responsible for all the kids. Father sets the rules. Your child should be taught at home. Then when he comes out of the house, he will know. Father tells the children stories of his heritage. He uses the mute on the TV when the children are watching, to explain things, like during *A Current Affair*, that are important to know. Sometimes he turns the TV off and talks about how he grew up.'

'What is happening in the community, the adults should know better. It just comes back to the children in the community from an early age they pick up things. Especially wrong things. It is the adults' responsibility.'

'You look all my boys. When I been come big, I thought they go follow my way. In '67, I stop drink. I thought they follow me, but no, too many company they keep. One night, my son, he come home drunk. I say to him, "Hey, look out! You better sleep outside, I think". I say to them, "I give up grog for you to look me and for you boys to take my footsteps". But, no.'



Participants stated role models also included brothers, sisters and cousins. When children had problems they would go to their eldest sister or brother. The siblings or cousins would go and sort out the problem and stop the fighting or growling. The children never took their problems to their parents. An older participant also stated when she had problems with disciplining her child she sought help from her other grown children.

'Wa. Like sometime them one strong head. Like when they smoke [marijuana], my son, like I talk for 'em and we been growl. Then I been after 'em. The boy been run and 'em been pick up big wood for hit me. I speak 'em, you take the wood come and I gor speak them brother bor you. My son speak you sing out them to come. I cry, and I speak 'em you stupid you steal from your cousin brother. I speak for 'em, you nor make them kind thing cause you make me shame.'

Grandparents are also important in raising the children. In most cases the grandmothers are the carer and guardian for the child.

‘We are helping them, telling them not to do the wrong thing and to do the right thing. We always talk to our grandchildren and any other family. We all family, help one another. We don’t want to see them get into trouble. It makes us very sorry when we see them get into trouble.’

‘We teach our grandchildren.’

‘I take my first grandchild as my own child. For my other grandchildren I tell them, I will always be here to support you. I tell my grandchild what is good for them, right or wrong, and they always take my advice.’

‘Mostly we grandmothers, the children mostly with us. They don’t call us grandmother, they call us, mama. Most of the children the grandparents grow them up. The parents, where? They gone. They leave them with us. For the teaching, we now have to teach them’



Grandmothers also believe religion is an important part of teaching children right from wrong. The introduction of Christianity into the Torres Strait is celebrated on the first day of July. This celebration is known as either July 1 or the Coming of the Light. Since the arrival of the Christian missionaries, a number of other religions are also present in the communities.

‘Religion is important in the community. We have few churches, Presbyterian, United Pentecostal, Assembly of God, Jehovah Witness. They visit us from outside the community. We always talk to our children, we must prayer.’

The impact of religion is evident in the daily lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, whereby most meetings are opened and closed with a prayer. Some participants describe how religion has had a positive influence on their lives and they believe religion would do the same for their children.

‘Religion is very important. I was brought by my parents who were very religious. For teens religion is not important but as they get older it comes back. My children don’t go to church. The role of the church is more of a community thing.’

‘Religion is very important in my upbringing. 1st of July celebration, Coming of the Light. We, our children, are reminded of what it is and why it is here.’

‘What is very strong in our religion is to be a Christian. My fathers said you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian. My father is a bishop. He said some preachers say Sunday is God’s day but we believe every day is God’s day. He always encouraged the children that you don’t have to go to church to pray, you can pray anywhere.’



Today, the role of the immediate and extended family in raising the child has remained the same, however, participants believe the close ties between families and within the community have changed.

‘There was only three house here, there was maybe three family to a house. We all share the house.’

‘Before we had proper unity, we come together, we work together, as one big family. We did it from the heart. But today, too much carry yarn.’

‘With government rules [Department of Community Services] we are not allowed to leave the children with aunt and uncle because of negligence cases.’

Some believe people have become busy and preoccupied in their own affairs, which has resulted in a lack of community support and an increase in jealousy and malicious gossip.

‘Too much carry yarn.’

‘People is going to carry yarn. That’s what is happening here. Some people have meeting, but nobody goes. Why? Because people are watching. They talk about everybody, that’s why.’

Participants stated children were the ones who were mostly affected. Children looked up to their parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles to show them right from wrong and how to grow up strong.

‘Them kids learn things from their family or friends. If they see their family doing it, then they do it.’

‘I was a young parent. I knew it was my responsibility from that time on. I looked around and saw it was hard to raise kids. I thought I could take pleasure by going out and drinking but I didn’t take that step. I thought it was too hard to drink and try and raise kids. So I didn’t even touch drink. I could see how other people behave as there was sly grog coming in, but I wanted to show example for my children and grandchildren.’



Theme 4: Cultural influences

Gloria lived in a house with 13 other people and was raised the traditional way. Her aunties were the main part of her childhood and it was their responsibility to raise Gloria and to teach her about the girl’s life. Gloria recalls how there was always something to do like washing clothes down at the creek or setting up the drum for boiling the water. She enjoyed collecting the wood and walking in the bush, especially playing and swimming in the creek.

Gloria attended school in Bamaga and was interested in health. The Department of Community Services employed her for two years as a health worker. Later, Gloria enrolled at the University of Queensland, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Indigenous Health Science.

Today, Gloria says she hopes her children will do the best in life. She hopes they complete their education and are able to cope with the negative effects of drinking, smoking and modern culture.

‘There is no respect. They can do what they want to do. No culture and tradition. Outside influences, especially modern music is a big problem now. There is more drinking and smoking, no strong interest in sports. They still look up to the aunts and uncles who set a bad example for them with drinking. They think it is normal.’

Gloria says parents are responsible for teaching their children right from wrong. Parents should support their children and show them how to be friendly and respectful, especially to their grandparents, aunts and uncles. Gloria disciplines her children by talking and explaining. Like her growing up days, Gloria says her aunty plays a big part in raising the children by providing advice and discipline.

Gloria is concerned that children and young people are losing their culture. She describes how children are not speaking the language and do not show respect for their elders. She believes a cultural centre and strong role models, like her partner and the chairperson, will help to keep the culture strong in the community. Gloria also believes religion plays an important part in the community's spiritual life and brings the community together.

As to the future, Gloria is concerned what the long-term outcome will be.

'We don't know ourselves what the long-term outcome will be.'



Many of the Northern Peninsula Area communities are a mix of different cultures.

'I was born in Old Mapoon but grew up in Bamaga. We moved to here in 1962.'

'I was born in Old Mapoon. I also lived on one of the outer islands and then we move here.'

'My parents were from Lockhardt. We all grew up here. My mother come up here in 1962 from Lockhardt, but my father already here working to chop all the trees down.'



Over time and with intermarriage the Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal communities have adopted some of the cultural activities that were unique to each group, such as words and ceremonial activities.

'There are five communities here, a lot of blending in with the Torres Strait and Aboriginal communities. Some combining, marriages, using Torres Strait Island Creole. Aboriginal communities adopting tombstone ceremony. During NAIDOC [National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee] week the communities show their traditional cultures, there is a blending in art.'

As the older generations are passing on, the importance of retaining culture and teaching it to the younger generation is left to a few people in the community. This group consists of only a few people that either have the knowledge or are capable of passing on this legacy.

‘New generation don’t talk English. We talk lingo and tell stories. Kids don’t understand lingo. No interest in learning it. Kids only talk easy words, like part of the body.’

‘Cultural breakdown, language was very strong back then, kids now don’t want to learn. Changes in our community, more alcohol and drugs, new images and it’s mixing with our culture. No interest in language in this generation.’

Most participants believe culture should be taught to the children by their parents. However, many of the parents in the community have also forgotten the language, the dance and the lore.

‘Elder in the community teach culture. Used to teach language before, but ‘em give up now.’

‘Before time we been got government teacher. They been stop all that language. That’s why we been lose plenty culture. Now today, we try and bring ‘em back little bit. Before if we talk language at school we get hiding. Today no much old people alive. All them language from them generation before me is gone.’

Culture is seen as an important part to helping kids grow up strong. Participants believe culture equips their children and young people with identity and with the tools for survival.

‘In my community, when you bring culture out of the community, take it out, you are lost, really lost. How many times I ask young boys to come out bush with me, and they say “No it’s alright we got the blue light disco tonight”. I been tell them, “Look you’re only there for the night, if Prime Minister come and speak, I am going to come here at 6 o’clock to see you dance, he going to jump when ‘em see you dance in the disco room”. He going to say “Hey, how come you dance this kind?” You know, it’s the firelight, not the electric light, that matters.’

‘It is different now days, we always interested in learning. We used to have Aboriginal Day and used to take interest in learning from older person about how to weave basket. But our kids don’t even have interest. We also don’t have older people to turn to now because they all passed on. Sad like.’

Cultural activities are included in some services and programs, such as NAIDOC (National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee) celebrations at the Activities Centre.

‘NAIDOC week talks about each culture, there is weaving, cooking and story telling.’

‘July 1st is the Coming of the Light, LMS [London Missionary Society]; light of Christ; also Mabo Day, Coming of the Man.’

‘Island cooking, tombstone opening and wedding is important to culture; husband taking son out hunting, mother-in-law teaches very good gardening and cooking. Cultural aspects are very important, especially respecting Elders. Music today is terrible. We had traditional dancing, got together and had a good time. A lot of changes, young people just want to be different. They are losing their identity. Home is the first place from which discipline must come.’



Some participants have also asked for culture to be included in programs and services such as sports and recreation. Participants also stated that community councils and the community in general needed to support cultural activities.

‘Like council have to try and help and the community people around here should help. We all got our own dinghy and wheels, if we can all help to take them children out. These are our leaders of the future.’

‘At NAIDOC they teach how to do traditional island cooking. Mischievous children were taken to me and my husband. We took them camping, my husband taught them how to hunt. They were coming right, but we couldn’t continue to help them because we ran out of money and the parents wouldn’t help out. One child out of four parents gave us 100 dollars that was all. We said we couldn’t do it anymore. They took them back but as soon as they got into trouble again they wanted us to take them back, but we said no.’

‘The young boys here can go and dance and learn their culture. They all welcome here. But it is the support. There is no support from the council and from the community. So most of the people have to do it by themselves, alone. They have to use the money out of their own pocket. People here too busy going their own way. It’s easy to say to a child, oh such and such doing this, you go there. Instead of thinking, “Oh, we all here, how can we help in some small way?” But no support.’

Theme 5: Role of services

There is a range of services available in the Northern Peninsula Area, with most of the services located in Bamaga. The services range from sports and recreation, women’s clubhouse, youth centres and activities centres and health services. Depending on the community, some of the services are described as being effective and others are not.

‘There are services up there but when we go up and tell all those things, all their friends know those things. You got to have trust. I need to trust somebody so I can open up. I need to know no matter how good that person is I need that person to say this thing will be confidential. It’s only between you and me. So many times people come and they say you come here, you read this thing and you do this and that. When we come back here, we put some thing in place. Too many times our people have seen these things, you know, from white fella, promises, promises, promises. They still do nothing about it.’

‘There is sports and rec but some kids don’t go. Some do go, depends on the sport.’



Some participants believe government should consult with the community before establishing a program or service in the region.

‘We don’t get asked. They decide from outside. There is no consultation.’

Educational services have also changed in the Northern Peninsula Area. Unlike previous years when there was no high school or post secondary school opportunity, the Northern Peninsula Area communities now have access to a range of educational services.

‘I walked to school every day until I leave school at age 15. I go as far as 7th grade. But, today, them kid got more. They got good education up there. Right up to grade 12. They can be sit down in office like you [interviewer], now. But you can’t get anyone to do that. They come back, for what?’

There are two primary and preschools in the Northern Peninsula Area—one in Bamaga and one in Injinoo. A high school, located in Bamaga, caters for all five communities. A bus provides transport to the high school from the surrounding communities. There are also two licensed day care centres—one in Bamaga and one in Injinoo; two activity centres—one in Umagico and one in Injinoo; and one TAFE facility based in Bamaga. In recent years, the Queensland University of Technology has established an outreach facility in Bamaga.



Whilst education services are available and accessible, participants highlighted the problem of non-attendance, especially among the primary and high school students as a major problem. Although a bus provided daily transport for all communities, participants stated that most children still did not go to school.

‘Primary school here. Some them kids like and some don’t. Main lot go high school. They don’t walk anymore, they do easy way, they just jump in and shut the door. Somebody else drive.’

‘We had responsibilities, different responsibilities for different aged siblings. I was responsible for looking after my brothers and sisters. Now teenagers get away with everything, wagging school, backchat. I see lots of teens dropping out of school at 16–17 years old. We were not allowed to wag school. Education was important. We only missed school for tombstone, funeral or leave.’

‘One morning this bus driver tell me he run around one community and nobody to pick up. He come down here to pick up two kids, but mother say, “It’s alright. Them two gonna stop”.’

One of the reasons for non-attendance included bullying, which as described by one of the older participants, has been a problem for some time.

‘Before it was a bit hard but now you see a lot of changes. Before all the communities, Umagico, New Mapoon and Injinoo, sit together. They fight a lot with the other kids. It was a big problem the same time.’

Younger participants stated differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially at school, still existed.

‘Today, they say, we don’t want them Aboriginal people here. When our kids go there, they say, “Don’t come here, this school blo mepla”.’

‘The way I see it, because some of them kids get picked on a lot.’

One mother describes the effects of bullying on the children:

‘That kid, you know, before, he rise up out of bed without being told to get up and go. Then all of a sudden he says, “I don’t want to go to school”. You ask him “What’s the reason why?” They are afraid to explain themselves because they think they might get growling from you and then when you make them go to school they get in trouble at school. That’s why so many kids don’t want to go to school.’

Although bullying was cited as a major influence on school attendance, participants also commented on the quality of the primary and secondary education services and the experience and empathy of teachers.

‘Many important subjects are not taught; we don’t have teachers for biology and chemistry. Teachers need to understand something about the culture to teach in remote communities. Before days we had teachers from the community. They could communicate, understanding the culture. Teachers come here straight from school. They have culture shock and go home. They only stay for two year contracts.’

‘Teachers can’t fit in if they don’t know something about the community and the culture.’

‘Knowledge about the community is essential. We have about 10 Indigenous teachers shared by all communities.’

Some participants stated their families sent their children away to boarding school to give them a better opportunity.

‘I would send my kids away to boarding school in Cairns. Have to be only girl or boy school, not mixed, otherwise this problem still there. My nieces and nephews go.’

‘My child goes to boarding school. Mixed there, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, no problems getting along. They get discipline down there. Not like up here. They there to learn.’

It is clear from the responses that participants strongly believe that education has a major influence in the development of strong and healthy children.

‘We before we no got bus, we no got this education like university. In my day I nor miss school. Now, today, you can go right up to university, like white man, you can be some body. But now, nobody get that far yet.’

‘After school, I didn’t go away and study. It was hard to go and study. Maybe my parents didn’t know about it or maybe my Mum didn’t know about it.’

However, many of the participants believe the situation is so bad that there seems to be no solution. Even if a person did have the qualifications there were no jobs or accommodation in the community and no support from the council to address the problem. For example, community councils should provide meaningful employment, unlike the Community Development Employment Program, where people worked one week out of the fortnight for their social security payments.

‘Government can’t do nothing. I think only one thing make them kid go school and that is take that allowance from mother. If kids don’t go school, mother don’t get money. We before when we go school we have no child endowment. We live with no money. Mother must teach them kid discipline.’

‘As long as they have that education. When they go to school they can get anything. Better job and better life. When they come back they go no choice. Might be they go, but when they come back to community to find job, nothing.’

Discussion points

At the conclusion of each discussion, participants made the following recommendations:

‘When you teach children what is right thing, you also should consult with parents. Anything to do with child at school, they all under age, they need to get consent forms signed. Parents need to approve program beforehand. They should talk to the parents first. Instead the kids come back and say “They told me at school that I can report you to the police or family services”. Never mind you the mother, you can’t do anything. No consultation with parents.’

‘Some of us try our hardest to improve our children. When them kids go to school, they all mix up with one another. Then when they come back to the community they wonder why people fighting or why they not allowed to go with this family or that family. There should be a program about how to be good role models.’

‘It will be an ongoing thing to try and stop that carry yarn. We need like a justice group where you sit down with the other person and you air out your business with a facilitator. It won’t go away overnight. It will always be here, at least we can know the level to control it.’

‘Funding to have a centre for kids to learn about their culture. All the people can talk their stories, what they used to do. Other person take them bush or hunting. ‘Cause it is just dying out.’

‘Each community should have their own school so the kids can feel comfortable going to that school.’

‘Funding is needed for a cultural centre. We don’t want to lose our culture. A cultural centre will help keep our community and Elders involved and to keep the culture strong. So to get involved in a culture centre would help to teach the language. English is better known now than in the older days. We need to know our relationships, where aunty and uncle used to be.’

4 Qualitative data

4.1 Collection methodology

Torres Strait trial qualitative data collection involved the use of focus groups and in-depth interviews with key informant groups from each of the main communities in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area. These have sought to document the views of parents and other stakeholders about what is important in raising healthy and competent children who are able to take their place as responsible adults and future parents.

Theoretical approach

The theoretical approach informing the design, implementation, analysis and reporting of this information is participatory-action research. This aims to provide an integrated process which draws on the skills and knowledge of all participants (that is, the people being researched and the researchers) with the goal of increasing the knowledge of all participants and enabling social transformation (Brydon-Miller 1997).

Participatory-action research is often used in contexts where there are knowledge and power imbalances, including research in developing countries and research with Indigenous populations (Dickson 2000). It particularly recognises the importance of engaging a range of stakeholders and returning the findings to them in a suitably accessible form (such as a community report) so that they may be used to inform policy and community driven action.

Sampling

The contract for the qualitative data collection phase of the Trial required the collection of data from the main populated islands within the Kalakawal, Kaiwalagal, Meriam, Kulkagal and Kalalagal regions of the Torres Strait, and the Northern Peninsula Area.

Recruitment of participants

Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) were employed by the (then) Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) to assist in engaging each community with the use of publicity materials and community barbeques to help explain the purpose of the trial. The CLOs convened focus groups, individual interviews, and in some cases assisted with translation (where necessary). The informants for the focus groups and study participants were selected from each of the island communities by the CLOs to provide a representative range of views on matters relevant to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and to comment on their family, community, cultural and spiritual environments of child rearing.

Community informants/stakeholders

Four groups of informants/stakeholders were identified. These included:

- community Elders
- parents and caregivers
- young people
- service providers and other stakeholders.

Topics and themes investigated

The information collected from the focus groups and in-depth interviews focused on five general themes relevant to the raising of children in the Torres Strait context:

- Theme 1—Starting out: What do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to have the best start in life to grow up strong?
- Theme 2—Growing up: What helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to stay on track, become healthier, more positive and stronger?
- Theme 3—Family role: What is the importance of family, extended family and community in the early years of life and when growing up?
- Theme 4—Cultural influences: What are the differences between how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are raised compared to children of other cultural backgrounds and how do community characteristics influence child development and wellbeing?
- Theme 5—Role of services: How can services and other types of support make a difference to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children? How does the availability, nature and delivery of services impact on child development and wellbeing?

Scope and coverage of data collection

As the time and resources available did not permit all five themes to be explored with each of the four groups of informants for each island cluster, quotas were arranged to ensure an adequate coverage of topics and informants. This meant that focus groups and interviews were organised to concentrate on just one or two of the five themes.

This was done flexibly, recognising that there is some overlap between themes. Each focus group and interview thus commenced with a clear focus for discussion but also allowed for exploration and recording of comments on topics relevant to the other themes where this was appropriate.

Demographic profile of participants

A brief demographic profile was recorded by the research team for each participant prior to the commencement of each group or interview. This included personal contact details, their age, island/community, the date of their participation, and their informant group (that is, parent, Elder, youth or service provider).

Informed consent

Informed consent was sought before each interview. This followed a process approved by FaCS and the Human Ethics Committee of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services at the Menzies School of Health Research. This involved participants being given a written and verbal explanation of the purpose of the study as part of the 'Footprints in Time' study. An explanation was provided of the arrangements to protect confidentiality and what would be done with information they provided.

Consent was sought for their participation in a focus group or interview, the audio and/or written recording of information, and the release of the information in summary form in community reports, scientific publications and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children web site.

All participants were informed of their right to withdraw their consent for participation at any stage. Consent was also sought for photographs of individuals to be used in study publications and the study website. This also stipulated that this consent could be withdrawn by family in the event a participant's death. The study information provided to participants made it clear that they would not be identified individually by name in any final reports or publications, unless they had specifically given assent for this to occur.

4.2 Data collection procedures

The focus groups and interviews were conducted by teams involving an external researcher assisted by a local Indigenous researcher who also acted as a cultural advisor and/or translator as required.

In the first round of data collection in the Torres Strait the facilitation and note-taking roles were taken by different members of the research team including external and local researchers, the CLOs and the FaCS staff member as negotiated by the individual teams. During the first round of fieldwork an additional external researcher from the research partner was also present to provide a quality assurance role. A FaCS team member accompanied each research team to oversee the organisation of the data collection and provide support where necessary.

During the second round, the data collection process was refined and all focus groups and interviews were facilitated by the external researcher. Notes were recorded by the local Indigenous researcher with back up from the CLO or FaCS staff member where required.

Focus group procedures

Each focus group was around one and a half hours duration, including a short break. The facilitator commenced with a brief explanation of the purpose of the study and ensuring that all consent forms had been completed. Basic ground rules were then established to make it clear that:

- everyone's views matter and should be respected
- people should feel free to respond to what others say
- the facilitator will keep the discussion moving so everyone has their say
- confidentiality must be respected as some issues discussed might be personal or sensitive.

At the conclusion of the focus group the research team conducted a debriefing session. This discussed how the interview went and whether everyone had the opportunity to input adequately. It included discussion of any problems which might have arisen and how these could have been addressed or could be avoided or addressed in the future.

The debriefing also allowed for discussion of observations made in the session, the main themes, interpretations, and ideas that came from the session. This also gave an opportunity to fill in any gaps in the notes and to clarify issues that may have required cultural or language explanation.

Following the write-up of the notes this information and the relevant demographic profiles and consent forms were placed in a locked bag for transportation to the mainland.

In-depth interview procedures

The in-depth interviews were conducted by the external researcher and the local Indigenous researcher with reference to a set of semi-structured questions. This interview guide was prepared with the advice of the research team and the CLOs to gather information on each of the five theme topics and to ensure its cultural appropriateness and choice of language.

The interview introduction and prompting questions were specifically designed to bring out personal stories of resilience and strength. Information on specific difficulties and problems faced by families and communities in raising their children were also explored.

4.3 Production of the report

At the conclusion of the fieldwork, the round one data from the Kalakawal, Kaiwalagal, Meriam, and Kulkalgal clusters were analysed and written up by the study team at the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. Data collected from Kalalagal and the Northern Peninsula Area during the second round were analysed and written up by the external researchers that collected the data and the draft reports were sent to the Institute for collation into the final report and editing.

The data analysis involves a thematic descriptive analysis of the data for the production of an interim summary report. The interim report was provided to FaCSIA. The draft reports were returned to the communities and individuals who gave their stories to get final clarification and feedback. The purpose of this feedback process was to verify with participants and stakeholders that the recording, analysis and interpretation of findings provides an accurate reflection of the information provided. Feedback received has been incorporated in the preparation of this final report.

Endnotes

1. The information on language came from the CRC Torres Strait web site at <www.crctorres.com>.
2. The information on each of the communities came from the Torres Strait Regional Authority web site at <www.tsra.gov.au>.

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Occasional Papers

1. *Income support and related statistics: a ten-year compendium, 1989–99*
Kim Bond and Jie Wang (January 2001)
2. *Low fertility: a discussion paper*
Alison Barnes (February 2001)
3. *The identification and analysis of indicators of community strength and outcomes*
Alan Black and Phillip Hughes (June 2001)
4. *Hardship in Australia: an analysis of financial stress indicators in the 1998–99 Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Expenditure Survey*
J Rob Bray (December 2001)
5. *Welfare Reform Pilots: characteristics and participation patterns of three disadvantaged groups*
Chris Carlile, Michael Fuery, Carole Heyworth, Mary Ivec, Kerry Marshall and Marie Newey (June 2002)
6. *The Australian system of social protection—an overview (second edition)*
Peter Whiteford and Gregory Angenent (June 2002)
7. *Income support customers: a statistical overview 2001*
Corporate Information and Mapping Services, Strategic Policy and Knowledge Branch, Family and Community Services (March 2003)
8. *Inquiry into long-term strategies to address the ageing of the Australian population over the next 40 years*
Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services submission to the 2003 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Ageing (October 2003)
9. *Inquiry into poverty and financial hardship*
Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (October 2003)
10. *Families of prisoners: literature review on issues and difficulties*
Rosemary Woodward (September 2003)
11. *Inquiries into retirement and superannuation*
Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services submissions to the Senate Select Committee on Superannuation (December 2003)
12. *A compendium of legislative changes in social security 1908–1982*
(June 2006)
13. *A compendium of legislative changes in social security 1983–2000*
Part 1 1983–1993, Part 2 1994–2000
Bob Daprè (June 2006)
14. *Evaluation of Fixing Houses for Better Health Projects 2, 3 and 4*
SGS Economics & Planning in conjunction with Tallegalla Consultants Pty Ltd (August 2006)

15. *The 'growing up' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: a literature review*
Professor Robyn Penman (September 2006)
16. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views on research in their communities*
Professor Robyn Penman (September 2006)

