



# “IT’S ABOUT TIME”

Transformative practice in an  
Aboriginal intensive family  
support service.

2021



CENTRAL  
AUSTRALIAN  
ABORIGINAL  
CONGRESS  
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

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The authors are grateful for the thoughtful and insightful comments made by Dr Daphne Hewson, Associate Professor Kerry Taylor and Ms Colleen Hayes who agreed to act as 'critical peer reviewers' of the draft report:

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**Cover picture:** Sonya and Rebecca with kids on mat

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## Notes on terminology

The terms **formal and informal worlds** are used to describe the different world views held by professionally-qualified staff and those held by Aboriginal people with a strong, lived understanding of the family and community context. Formal and informal are the terms used within the team and should not be seen to indicate any form of hierarchy.

Similarly, the term **professional** is used to describe staff qualified in a professional discipline requiring codified knowledge, and is valued equally to, not more than, Aboriginal knowledges.

The term **Aboriginal** is used throughout the report rather than First Nations or Indigenous Australians. The term Aboriginal is preferred by Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) and by the Aboriginal authors.

## A note on style

This document is written in a style that is familiar with academics, researchers and policy-makers, and may be less accessible for those unused to reading complex documents of this type and length.

Future work by the authors may result in different ways of presenting the information to make it more useful to a broader audience.



Yarning mat, developed by Faye Perriman





NO SMOKING  
ON PREMISES

DENTAL

1st Avenue  
Great Care



Gabriel and Thompson on mat with staff

# 1

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) receives funds from the Australian Government to provide Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS) to parents and caregivers of children where child neglect is a concern. In 2020, staff of the Congress service initiated a project to identify the key features of their model that they believe contributes to their successful operation. An external project officer worked with the team to develop a publication that details their service model. All team members participated in a process involving an individual interview, and a series of team workshops. This document, jointly authored by the project officer and all team members, is the result.

The team identified five meta themes as key features of the service: values, practice, people, environment, and transformative practice. Each of these have several sub-themes, as shown in the diagram. The team's transformative practice is multifaceted and possible only through the interaction of its components. These components are described as deep learning, embracing problems, motivation and empowerment, being client and family centred, working at a slow and intentional pace, and knowledge co-creation within the team. The complex interaction of both the features underpinning the service, and the elements of transformative practice (what has been achieved) is represented in the diagram.

Following a more detailed analysis of the themes and their interaction, some further features were identified (again, shown in diagram). These highlight the areas which demonstrate the service's distinctiveness in this sector. The 'cultural interface', or 'third space' (where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing come together) assist in understanding the IFSS ways of working, as do culturally safe and trauma-informed practice. Along with reflection (and critical reflection), these are the key enablers of the transformational practice evident.

The transformative practice of this team works beyond what may be implied by the bi-cultural model that officially describes their approach. The bicultural pairs are only the most basic ingredient for this space; it most certainly is enriched by, and dependent on, all the other features of the Congress IFSS Way, as these enable the team to operate with such breadth and depth of knowledge. This is a 'co-present team', where effective leadership is modelled and dispersed, and because it is often non-linear requires a high level of affective functioning of all team members.

The team works at the cultural interface, a highly functioning space for knowledge co-creation and holistic practice. It is also where culturally safe and trauma-informed approaches (underpinned by strong and contextualised approaches to reflection) provide the conditions for growth of staff, the team collectively, as well as clients and their families. These are the significant points of difference of the Congress IFSS way of working and which warrant more recognition in the sector.

This team demonstrates what can be achieved when retention of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal reach a certain point of stability, long enough to enable the transformative practice to emerge. As the team identifies:

*"Enough time must be allowed before you can expect anything. This goes for developing the workplace culture that is needed, through to establishing relationships with clients and the subsequent work you can do with them. Time is critical to everything. Really, It's about time."*

Diagram 1: The Congress IFFS way of working and the co-present team



## 2

## INTRODUCTION

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) receives funds from the Australian Government to provide Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS) to parents and caregivers of children where child neglect is a concern. The IFSS program is intended to provide practical parenting education and support to parents and caregivers in their communities and homes, to help them improve the health, safety and wellbeing of their children. IFSS is an evidence-informed program, and is required to assess service outcomes, including increased parental capacity, increased child wellbeing and reduced child neglect. The IFSS program is intended to be locally adapted and culturally appropriate for the communities in which they operate. IFSS program guidelines further state that relationships and collaboration are critical to achieving desired outcomes, as is a strong workforce development focus.

The Congress IFSS adopted a particular bi-cultural approach which the Congress Targeted Family Support Team (TFSS) had developed and practised since 2009. In 2018 the Congress IFSS and TFSS Teams combined to form one team to enable staff to work across the program and provide a high level of support for clients. Staff within this team (i.e. Congress Family Support Team) identify that the bi-cultural pairs approach was fundamental to the success of the program and achieves all of the funding program requirements to a high degree. In 2020, IFSS staff initiated a process to help them to reflect on their work as a team with a view to documenting the defining features of their service for the benefit of the Congress IFSS service, the wider Congress organisation, and for other services with a similar focus. This process involved working with a project officer (ML) who assisted the team identify and document these special features of the program.

## 2.1 METHOD

1. An initial meeting was held with the team leader on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020 to clarify the process and aims of the project.
2. The first team meeting was held on 20<sup>th</sup> May to discuss:
  - Aims of project, including clarification of the team's expectations and anticipated audience for the end product
  - Process to be used
  - The positive aspects of the IFSS service team members would like articulated in the final product (features they feel make the service special).
3. Individual interviews were conducted with all staff (n=9) between 26<sup>th</sup> May – 4<sup>th</sup> June. Interviews were 45 minutes to 1.5 hours in length.
4. A preliminary thematic analysis was conducted by ML to present a summary to the team for further discussion (see below).
5. A second team meeting was held on 26<sup>th</sup> June to discuss the broad themes emerging from the interviews to date and to obtain agreement about how the information would be presented and discussed in the final product.
6. A third team meeting was held on 17<sup>th</sup> September to consider the findings (section 3) and agree on a broad approach to the discussion section.
7. A fourth team meeting was held on 5<sup>th</sup> November to consider the discussion (section 4) and agree on an approach to finalising the document.

The paper has been developed through a collaborative and participatory process, with one author (ML) collecting and collating the data, and preparing the drafts for input and comment from all authors. The first author does not work within the service. The paper was written in third person for ease of reading and because first person would not be possible throughout. However, the 'voice' of the paper is collectively the IFSS team, and all authors have direct quotes illustrating important themes within the paper. Direct quotes are attributed with an anonymous code<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.2 SERVICE DESCRIPTION

The service comprises nine full time staff:

- Four non-Aboriginal Caseworkers, all of whom have formal qualifications in social work or similar.
- Four Aboriginal Family Support Workers, one of whom is a qualified social worker, and another is almost finished an honours year. Two are also local language speakers.
- One team leader (PH) who is a non-Aboriginal, social welfare worker with extensive experience working in central Australia and with Aboriginal families.



Sonya (above) and Ange (below) at their desks



The essence of the model is that each client/family that the service works with is allocated two workers, one of the caseworkers<sup>2</sup> and one of the Aboriginal Family Workers (bi-cultural pair). Case management decisions are shared and input is provided equally by both members of the pair. While the caseworker may hold the risk for client outcomes in the 'formal world', the Aboriginal worker will hold the risk in the 'informal world'. In this way, both members of the pair share risk (equally but differently) and otherwise contribute equally.

Congress IFSS is available to families with children aged 0-12 years, where child neglect concerns are present, and reside within a 100km radius of Alice Springs. Participation in IFSS is voluntary, requiring families to consent to a referral being made. Self-referrals can also be made to IFSS. Currently there are three pathways into the IFSS program, with priority given to families on Child Protection Income Management (CPIM). Referral access points are as follows:

- **Tier 1:** Families referred by the child protection authority to CPIM and IFSS due to child neglect concerns<sup>3</sup>
- **Tier 2:** Families on any measure of Income Management referred by the child protection authority to IFSS due to child neglect concerns, where service vacancies exist
- **Tier 3:** Community-referred families are accepted into IFSS where there are child neglect concerns and where service vacancies exist.

The majority of the families who have received support from IFSS have had very complex needs such as domestic violence, homelessness and/or substance misuse, which has impacted on their parenting capacity. Over the past six years Congress IFSS has provided intensive family support to 92 families. Three families were re-referred, bringing the total number of families to 96. Of the families that Congress IFSS has provided support to, seven children have been removed from their parents through a child protection intervention. This low number of removals can be in some ways attributed to the strong partnership that has been established with child protection in working with families jointly and being clear of each other's roles in working with highly vulnerable families. The Congress IFSS team carries on average 16 families at any one time, which can include up to 30 parents/caregivers and between 30-40 children.

## 2.3 BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SERVICE

The history of the service and the original aims underpinning the model provides important context for considering how the service embraced the principles articulated at the outset, and which have enabled the success and continued evolution of the program. A 2014 evaluation (Segal & Nguyen, 2014) found a clear need for a high quality intensive family support service to work with the most challenging families and highly vulnerable children; strong support for the Congress IFSS program from families and stakeholders; and that the program was making observable progress and should continue. As previously mentioned, the current program is the result of merging two programs in 2018, Targeted Family Support and Intensive Family Support Programs. This occurred due to the Targeted Family Support Program becoming a smaller service as a result of a reduction in funding and it was determined by Congress management to merge the teams under one program to enable a high level of service to be provided to the clients. When a referral is received Congress is able to determine which program best suits the client's needs based on considerations such as the level of complexity and potential intensity of the casework required.

The service's success is attributed in part to having the time and opportunity to develop clear operational procedures prior to recruiting staff and to recruiting the right people at the outset. As the bi-cultural model is at the core of the service, initial recruitment included a very experienced Aboriginal worker (still a member of the team) with a long career working in Aboriginal educational and welfare services. This experience and depth of cultural understanding (cultural lore knowledge) is considered essential in the establishment phase and for initial and ongoing workplace learning. In particular, encouraging and modelling for the Aboriginal staff in using their own voice to speak on behalf of their clients without deferring to perceived superiority of Western knowledge provided a foundation for the early integration of Aboriginal knowledge into the model.

<sup>1</sup> Codes commencing with A indicate a direct quote from an Aboriginal author. Codes commencing with B indicate a direct quote from a non-Aboriginal author. Quotes from group (team) meetings are attributed as either G1, G2, G3 or G4 according to which of the four team meetings the comment was made.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Aboriginal staff with formal qualifications such as social work are not precluded from being caseworkers – it is up to the individual which role they choose to apply for.

<sup>3</sup> For Tier 1 and Tier 2, the child protection authority jointly manages a case with an IFSS provider and maintains statutory responsibility for a case, while it remains open.

# 3

## FINDINGS:

### FEATURES OF THE SERVICE

As a result of the consultations (individual interviews and group meetings), five meta themes were identified as key features of the service. These are: values, practice, people, environment, transformative practice, and each have several sub-themes. Illustrative quotes are included for each theme.



Team working together at desk

## 3.1 VALUES

***“The team has a social contract; values that everyone shares.” (G1)***

### 3.1.1 Family and client focus

Team members need a certain level of passion for the work where success may not be obvious, to feel genuine interest and respect for families, and to be comfortable with small changes and often very slow progress.

***“They need to really want to work with people and want to hear their stories and value deep connections.” (B4)***

***“Working with that mother or that father... seeing little changes in families, that’s where I get my gold medals.” (A9)***

All team members spoke about being attuned to noticing those “*small wins*” so they can be celebrated and turned into strengths to build on. For example:

***“...we had a child... who hardly went to school in first term. Second term, he went to school five days in a row. And that was really exciting. Because for him, that was amazing, and for his mum as well and his other family members. So, you’ve got to really celebrate those small wins. And you hope that in supporting the family to do that you’re developing skills that they can apply to other areas of their life, ... and realise what they can achieve, and get a sense of achievement.” (B1)***

Although small, these wins are important and their celebration offers opportunities for family members to feel differently about themselves. The case work is managed in a way that encourages families to set their own goals, with support, and to feel some sense of control of their lives.

***“We try to give them, show them, a positive experience of working with services, that they can take with them when we are not there anymore... One of the first things I was told when I started here was ‘We don’t lead the families, we don’t push the families. We walk along with them’. I always remember that.” (A3)***

***“Families don’t really get an opportunity to explore what is positive for them. We focus on that – what their strengths are – to give them a different experience, a different way of thinking about themselves.” (A2)***

The ability to build positive relationships with families is a source of pride for the team and individual team members:

***“Being able to build relationships with families, with clear boundaries and expectations, where other services have struggled before...” (B5)***

The family and client focus value of the service is imbued in the service model and is connected to who the staff are as people. Staff can take pride in others’ achievements because they are not ego driven, and because they accept that they are “*in it for the ‘long haul’*.” (B4). The opportunity to establish meaningful and trusting relationships is inbuilt in the model - it is unusual compared to other services and is therefore highly respected and valued by the team.

### 3.1.2 Team work

Team members value that the work is undertaken by them collectively - no one person's views or perspective dominate. There is no assumption that one person would know what needs to be done. Rather, staff appreciate the value that the work can *only* be done with more than one perspective, and all are comfortable with 'not knowing'. There is a strong foundation of trust and safety within the workplace which also extends to the client work:

***"Our team is genuine, honest... We unload together and it's safe to do so." (A9)***

Weekly meetings are held to ensure that all staff feel connected to each other, and have an opportunity to tell and listen to both challenging and good news stories:

***"We share all the good stuff; we share all the bad stuff. It is a shared burden, and shared joys too." (A3)***

Within this team culture, staff are safe (and encouraged) to test ideas with each other and to not feel judged when speaking up. This builds a personal and a collective confidence, and when things don't go well the team rallies:

***"Sometimes you get frustrated... we come back, regroup and try not to give up." (A7)***

The role of the team leader in managing a work environment conducive to team work was acknowledged:

***"I think getting that balance between, not micromanaging, but still making sure we keep on track and also keeping a culture, sort of like hospitality... She'll bring afternoon tea so we chat with each other, that kind of thing. To me that creates a culture... of friendliness and sharing. That's a big part of it. ...She has that balance right, and I know behind the scenes ... to keep our team doing what we're doing... she is willing to go into bat for us with other organisations. You always know that she's going to back you up in what you do." (B1)***

The collaborative nature of the work is attributed both to the maintenance of the workplace culture and that cross-cultural perspectives are accorded equal value:

***"... that collaborative process, you know when it works, you really notice that... That's a lovely part of Aboriginal culture that has permeated into our team. And I think that's really amazing when we can bring the value of that into our team - the community, the communal way of thinking, you know, that it's not just about me, it's actually about all of us. And we're all in this together, so let's do it as well as we can." (B1)***

### 3.1.3 Respect

Respect is a value present in all aspects of the work, including a genuine respect for each other and for difference. This includes respecting and accepting whatever is going on for staff:

***"We don't have to put on a mask here, as I've felt in other workplaces." (A2)***

In particular, the high level of respect held for Aboriginal perspectives is highlighted, and all of the Aboriginal staff agree that their contribution is genuinely valued by non-Aboriginal team members. The sense of "tokenistic and paternalistic" (A2) employment of Aboriginal staff observed by some team members in external agencies, is not felt by the Aboriginal staff within this team. And this same respect extends to clients of the service:

***"I treat people how I want to be treated. ...We treat families as responsible adults. We are never patronising with families." (A7)***

***"We show respect for the children too, just the same as with the adults." (A9)***

The Aboriginal workers point out that clients will know very quickly whether or not they are respected, and if they sense this is lacking or not genuine in any regard, there will be no possibility of establishing a meaningful relationship, as there is too much at stake for them:

***"These mob, they watch your every move. They can read you like a book. ...and everyone knows everyone... For them, it's about survival." (A9)***

The experience of working in the team has been profound for individual team members in this regard. Even for those

with considerable experience in other organisations in central Australia respect for Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives had in many ways only been theoretical, or at least not known at such depth, until the experience of working in this team: *“We [may] think we know, but you don’t know until you actually are in it.”* (B8)

This respect for each other’s unique contribution allows for a genuine integration of different perspectives in discussions and decision-making, which is then easily modelled for clients and families. For example, the male team members (DC and CL) offer perspectives from their own gendered experiences of parenthood, and work in a way that demonstrates both respect and compassion for adult male family members while also modelling this same regard for women and children.

Team members share the value that men deserve the respect and understanding that is offered to other family members. They have their *“own stories and also need to be given the opportunity to heal and understand that there is a better way.”* (A2) While this is a value of the service, respect for men is not always a shared value with partner organisations, and this is a major source of frustration for some team members. This is particularly the case for the Aboriginal workers with a lived experience with some parallels to the families they are working with.

### 3.1.4 Learning

Learning is an important shared value underpinning the service:

***“you need to want the challenge to learn new things, as well as [appreciate] the benefit of that ...to step out of the way that you’ve thought about things before and think about things differently”.*** (B1)

All staff readily talk about the team as a learning environment, where personal learning has often far exceeded what has been learned in other workplaces. The workplace is described as stimulating, where learning is constant, and where challenges are worked through and difficulties never ignored. For example, case discussions are ‘learning spaces’ and the use of all the *“resources in place to support professional casework such as case note templates that contain prompts, yarning mat activities, other professional framework, these all keep us learning all the time.”* (B6). Activities undertaken with families such as ‘active play’ with children are considered as learning opportunities for staff as well as families.

It is not uncommon for staff to identify their learning from this workplace using words such as *“amazing”* or *“profound”*. In particular, team members must be open to taking on the different perspectives offered by other team members, and there can be no expectation that the Aboriginal staff will have

the most to learn. The non-Aboriginal workers need to be *“open to our feedback”* and to come in with an attitude that they have to take time *“to learn from us”* and from the team (A7).

All team members value learning as individuals, and readily share with each other what and how they are learning. All agree that this openness to and about their own learning contributes to building the collective knowledge of the team, which in turn, further improves their own practice.

Learning is a fundamental value of the service, and in fact, the bi-cultural model is premised on a ‘both ways learning’ approach to practice. However, while this is a shared value for all staff and for the service as a whole, it impacts on team members differently. For example, non-Aboriginal staff must be willing to go through a process of ‘unlearning’ which can be challenging and uncomfortable, as can the transition to working in pairs:

***“The unlearning that has to happen is understood”, this is never finished*** (B6)

Learning to adapt to the context of work is also demanding on the non-Aboriginal staff unused to the high levels of trauma and service system complexity of central Australia.

And for the Aboriginal staff, they feel a deep sense of responsibility to make sure the non-Aboriginal staff learn to work ‘the right way’ early on to ensure that families continue to get a positive experience from the service. This can be wearing for the Aboriginal staff, particularly for those who have a long career in central Australia:

***“Putting the time into training all the new staff can be draining.”*** (A9).

***“...it can be scary too when you get a new caseworker, and you’ve got to go through and speak to them about all the stuff that you might have taught all the other workers.”*** (A7)

Many things have to be repeated and reinforced, particularly in relation to explaining all the family connections and the ramifications for the Aboriginal staff member if something is said or done in a case work situation that is perceived by the family to be inappropriate. As this is an important part of providing a culturally safe environment for staff members and clients, this is non-negotiable. However, the cost to Aboriginal staff members must also be acknowledged as a potential source of frustration and something to be attended to in supervision and peer support. Non-Aboriginal staff are often from somewhere else, and will likely go somewhere else after their time in central Australia, so this is likely a pattern repeated throughout the career of the Aboriginal staff member:

***“For us mob, we’ll never leave our area.”*** (A7)

## 3.2 PRACTICE

***"Our supervisor is staunch on the [practice] values of the team. This comes from her having the [depth of] understanding of the clients that she has." (B4)***

### 3.2.1 Solid professionalism

***"I place value on being a good worker. I have respect for good workers." (B5)***

A high standard of professionalism is expected and nurtured by the team leader and by each other and is supported by:

- Team structures and processes

These include monthly supervision with team leader; case discussions once every six weeks (with the expectations that staff prepare for these discussions, and that involved external agencies participate); sharing of different cases with different workers (the pairs are not always comprised of the same people).

- Casework tools

These are appropriate for the context and include strengths-based needs assessments; case note templates; yarning mats and activity tools; Parents Under Pressure (PUP) Framework; ASQ-TRAK.

All of these processes and tools are readily identifiable by all team members and regarded as essential in maintaining a high professional standard of practice. They all have purpose and integrity and there is a solidity to their application:

***"These processes are seen to keep team members accountable as well as external agencies that are involved in the case discussions... When some external services have different goals than what we do, it can get a little bit complicated at times, but that's just part of the case management." (B1)***

The professionalism includes a shared commitment to working well in partnership with external agencies, and resolving conflicts in a professional and constructive manner. The consistent use of reflective questioning through the team, and modelled by the team leader, encourages staff to consider different perspectives and insights:

<sup>4</sup> See 'notes on terminology' at the beginning of the document

***"[a lot of my confidence comes] from the constant feedback, from the team leader, from the team. ...I'm a reflective person, so I think quite a bit in our processes all the time." (B5)***

### 3.2.2 Bi-cultural pairs

The bi-cultural pairs provide the main mechanism for the service model, and is how casework is practiced, where two knowledge bases (professional<sup>4</sup> and Aboriginal) are valued and drawn upon equally. An obvious benefit of the bi-cultural pairs is that there is immediate access to multiple layers of knowledge and understanding that would not otherwise be present. For example:

***"We [Aboriginal workers] can pick up on some of the language being used – tones, dialects. ...We can recognise when [clients] are just saying the 'right words' and even using culture to their advantage." (A2)***

***"Aboriginal people are really observant. I thought I was observant until I came here... (laughs) I noticed nothing! [The Aboriginal staff] in our team are just really intuitive and seem to read what's going on". (B1)***

When a new caseworker commences the Aboriginal staff pay close attention to how the staff member will work within the team, particularly in the bi-cultural pairs:

***"We take things slowly... but always just watching everything... making sure they are taking notice of us and what we say, particularly when we are preparing for a family visit". (A7)***

Rather than adding to the anxiety that a new worker may normally feel in new cross-cultural workplace, that this is happening is acknowledged and valued by the non-Aboriginal staff:

***“...they’re witnessing the way that you work. And to me, that’s a really good accountability as well.” (B1)***

Aside from the respect of the perspective offered by the Aboriginal staff, they are looking out for many things to ensure that the service is culturally safe for families. These include how the staff member presents themselves (such as what they wear, their language and the tone of their voice), how comfortable they are with informality (for example, sitting on the ground), their patience in allowing clients to speak in their own time, how they approach the client’s home, and how they interact with men and women making sure they are inclusive of all family members. Many of the things the Aboriginal staff are watchful for ensures the service remains client and family focussed as well as the safety of the workers.

***“They make sure we [the non-Aboriginal workers] assume nothing”. (B1)***

The value of the bi-cultural pairs is also noted when working with external agencies.

***“...our clients tend not to follow a linear narrative... We just sit there and listen to it all, and from there we draw out the information that we need”. (A3)***

In contrast, staff observe that non-Aboriginal colleagues from other organisations will often need to ask more questions to inquire what is happening for families, possibly because they are not as familiar with a narrative, story-telling way of communicating and therefore not as able to understand what is being said: *“It’s not okay to ask a lot of questions.”* [You need] *“sit down time”* or *“being time”* (A9), along with patience and comfort with non-linear story telling. These are the familiar and authentic forms of engagement within the team, that have been embedded through the influence of the bi-cultural model. All team members are clear that working in pairs, including home visits and making case work decisions, is fundamental, and that this is practiced even if the allocated workers are not available at a particular time: We don’t *“allow drift in that model to happen”* (B8). However, the team is also quick to point out that they are *“confident in each other’s ability to allow some autonomy”* where the need arises (G3).

Culture can also encompass gender and age, and these need to be understood and respected in a way that acknowledges how gender and age are differently valued and respected in Aboriginal world views and ways of knowing. Some staff members spoke about previous staff members who were uncomfortable with one or other of these and how this discomfort played out. However, at the completion time of this project the newest team member had been employed for 30 months, staff retention high and all staff describing a positive workplace with no major clashes or personality or perspective.



## 3.3 PEOPLE

**"When you are working with the most vulnerable families, you need the most skilled staff". (G1)**

### 3.3.1 Good recruitment for fit

Being kind, genuine and respectful to the existing social dynamic of the team is valued to the point that this 'fit' is non-negotiable and is actively sought during the interview process. Recruitment processes for the non-identified<sup>5</sup> case management positions are attuned to recognising certain qualities important to the team values and way of working, including openness to learning, respect for clients and the regard they have for Aboriginal perspectives:

**"...people who are in this team have to be open to learning and listening. If they're not, then they're not the right person in this team, and I think you can pick that up in recruitment. ...It's easy to sell yourself, but [panel members] need to be able to really drill down and be listening to what the responses are, and whether they're going to be the right fit or not." (B8)**

**"I guess it's really the respect that comes through when you're talking with somebody you get a sense of respect that they have for the clients for. You can sense the interest [they have] in people, and for this kind of work." (B1)**

As panellists "we look for openness and willingness to learn" (A3), and the ability and humility to be part of a team that works things out together. For new members of staff, good fit is dependent on the degree to which they seek and integrate the advice from the Aboriginal workers:

**"...when they spend time with the [Aboriginal] family workers, ask them questions and seek their advice and guidance, that's when you know they're going to fit in well". (B5)**

Recruitment of the Aboriginal workers requires similar criteria (such as a willingness to learn, and have respect for and openness to different perspectives), but rather than formal qualifications in a professional discipline, it is their cultural knowledge that is sought. This can be difficult to articulate in a position description, but it is generally understood to include knowledge of local families and community dynamics, an understanding of how local cultural information is held and acquired including the correct channels, and have capability in identifying what may be relevant for casework that a non-Aboriginal worker may not easily recognise. The capability includes being able to communicate respectfully and meaningfully with non-Aboriginal colleagues.

Local cultural lore knowledge (described as traditional culture, rather than cultural perspectives such as those developed in an urban environment), cannot be assumed to be held by all Aboriginal staff as everyone brings their own unique cultural history and experience. This requires an explicit exploration of what cultural 'capability' Aboriginal staff bring to the service. In this way, cultural knowledge is highly valued and elevated and can be developed with the Aboriginal staff with less knowledge of more traditional lore, over time, and as appropriate.

**"The knowledges can merge, but you have to have the right people – people need to know their place, their boundaries – there can't be any assumptions about cultural knowledge. People don't know what they don't know." (A9)**

<sup>5</sup> A non-identified position is one that is open to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal applicants.

Thus, the Aboriginal staff recruited to the service are required to meet high standards in relation to their own cultural knowledge. Further, a diversity of experience (including age and gender and potentially family/cultural background) become considerations in recruitment and attending to the collective knowledge and contribution to the team. Nothing can be assumed from a person identifying as Aboriginal; the recruitment needs to take a multitude of factors into account:

***“Knowledge is gained differently in Aboriginal societies. It is passed down from elders, so it is important to have people with cultural authority... This doesn’t always come from a position title.” (A9)***

This dynamic is acknowledged by the Aboriginal staff: *“the more I learn, the less I realise I know about my own culture.”* (A2). Their knowledge grows within their areas of expertise (Aboriginal culture), just as it does with the non-Aboriginal staff in the areas for which they have been employed.

### 3.3.2 Attention to team dynamics

***“This team works because we listen to each other.” (B5)***

There is a great deal of attention spent on creating the right work environment and team dynamics. The team describe the work environment as underpinned by a strong value to work well as a team, a *“social contract”* where we strive to ensure a *“welcoming and social space”* so that all team members *“want to work that way”*. (G1) There is no clique in the team as some staff members have experienced in previous workplaces. The social occasions that are organised, such as afternoon teas, or Friday night dinners, are deliberate and intentional events to ensure inclusivity, a sense of belonging and of being valued as whole people:

***“We create genuine friendships, and we are genuinely invested in each other’s wellbeing”. (A3)***

Inclusivity and investing in each other as whole people is important at all times, but also particularly when someone is new to town. *“We want to make sure they don’t take off”* (A7), that they feel supported and a sense of social connectedness.

This attention to team dynamics pays off over time, but all acknowledge that it takes constant maintenance:

***“we have the daily routine now. We’re doing well together. But it wasn’t always great”.***

***“...Yeah, and that can just be one person who comes in that can cause a ripple effect.”***

***“...but then if a person doesn’t fit because of all we’ve talked about that makes it work, eventually that person might not stay for long because if you don’t fit then, then you’ll go.” (G2)***

The team is very clear about their shared responsibility in setting the high standards and expectations of practice to ensure this level of professionalism is maintained, and that a poor fit in a new member of staff would not be allowed to compromise these standards. This includes ensuring a calm work space, where debriefing is encouraged, but where *“crisis mode”* is not. This is underlined by an intentionality in the team dynamic focused on both staff wellbeing, and client outcomes:

***“When you work in chaos, it’s hard to drill down into those little things that have an everyday impact on people’s lives, and just how challenging it is for clients... And also the little things that can make a big difference for them.” (B8)***

### 3.3.3 Staff as ‘whole selves’

Staff describe the workplace culture as one that fosters a sense of ‘sharing and caring’. Rather than being glib, this describes a culture that enables staff to get to know each other and enjoy spending time with each other in a way that works to improve client outcomes.

***“I really like spending time with these guys.” (B4)***

Team members bring their ‘whole selves’ to the workplace, describing this as a value and an intentional way of working:

***“We’ll share some of ourselves as well as at a professional level”. (B1)***

This way of working provides both the foundation for a pleasant workplace, but also access to diverse knowledges and ways of knowing. Age, gender, family life, cultural upbringing, interests, talents and so on are all part of the mix of knowledge that is drawn upon along with the codified (Western knowledge) and the Aboriginal and cultural knowledge formally represented by the bi-cultural model. Staff all value the social occasions that are held both during and outside work hours where they can get to know each other removed from the intensity of the casework. These are intentional occasions and understood as such. For example:

***“We value each other in terms of our knowledge, our experiences, our differences. That enhances our team dynamic... but it requires a lot of maintenance”. (A3)***

One possible caveat to this openness about each other's personal lives is that it is unknown how the team would react if a team member consistently chose not to participate in the social occasions and avoided sharing personal information. Given all acknowledge that the 'whole self' is brought in to the professional domain, it would present a challenge if one person chose to keep their boundary so firm as to create a barrier for the other team members. It is likely that not everyone would feel comfortable with this which may alter the team dynamic too much, so this is feature of the workplace culture may be non-negotiable. To date, this has not been a challenge that the team has faced.

This workplace culture, where staff are seen and valued as whole people, is intended to create both balance and safety for staff in a context of emotionally intense and complex work with a high trauma content. However, staff also point out that while there is an acceptance of people's personal issues, and even an encouragement by the team dynamic to share personal information and to seek support from colleagues, boundaries will be respected especially if a staff member is experiencing difficult personal circumstances:

***"There is no expectation that you need to know what is going on – it is at the discretion of whoever is involved."* (B6)**

Staff also point out that not only is it important being okay to be known as your whole self, it is also important to have a high level of self-awareness in order to share appropriately and to know what might be going on for others.

### 3.3.4 Personal and professional boundaries

Personal and professional boundaries are secure, expected and managed through a range of strategies including the rule that no phones are taken home, and that space is created for fun and 'non-work' conversation. Maintenance of boundaries assists to mitigate the possibility of staff becoming overwhelmed and to ensure that *"we don't get too close to a family to the point that things become blurry"* (B6). The potential for staff to lose the ability to hold their own professional boundaries due the level of trauma experienced by some of their clients is openly acknowledged. The role of, and particular skills of, the current team leader in these situations is critical:

***"It is her experience within this context, but also her willingness to say 'give me the risk, I can handle it. We can address [the problem] together'... We need someone safe, with skills in breaking things down, and very strengths based. You leave those sessions feeling positive and confident."* (B6)**

The genuine respect for, and valuing of, the respective knowledge of each worker is regarded as a standout feature of the team. However, this explicitly includes knowing a little about each other's personal life, because the 'whole self' is brought to the professional domain. This includes acknowledgment of the sometimes-parallel experience of the Aboriginal workers with some aspects of the families with whom they work:

***"because we've lived many of the experiences that our clients face, we [the Aboriginal staff] can sometimes be a little bit harder on them. We may draw the line earlier than the social workers, so their feedback as to why they are thinking the way they do is really important."* (A2)**

These potential parallel experiences also make the Aboriginal staff more likely to be personally challenged by the issues experienced by their clients. This may be experienced as 'triggers' for reliving past traumatic events, or it may be that their professional and private worlds cross over, which can be draining and stressful: *"be careful what you say"* (A7). Again, this is openly acknowledged as a possibility. This provides a safety net for these workers—they can be open about how a family's situation may be impacting on them and know they will not be judged and will be supported in managing boundaries.

Non-Aboriginal staff may also have experienced trauma or other hardships in their personal life and may also be triggered by their client's stories. However, the Aboriginal staff have a much closer historical and often current alignment with the experiences of the families with whom they work and this requires a particular openness and deliberate attention to managing these boundaries safely: *"we live lore and culture."* (A9)

For the Aboriginal staff, the way knowledge is held and shared (or not) forms part of their personal and collective (as a group of Aboriginal staff) boundary management. For example, some knowledge is entrusted (according to things such as gender or age) and can only be shared by certain people:

***"There's stuff that I can't talk about, that someone else may be able to, in regards to lore..."* (A2)**

## 3.4 ENVIRONMENT

***“It’s ridiculous, but it really is just a wonderful, pleasant place to work”. (B4)***

### 3.4.1 Managing vicarious trauma risk

All team members acknowledge the potential for feeling overwhelmed and stressed by the work context. There is a deliberate and obvious culture of looking out for each other, especially if someone notices a colleague not performing at their best or being “out of sorts”: “You check in and say, look I just noticed, is everything going okay?”. (B8) All agree that the paired approach to casework is helpful in “managing stress, and avoiding burnout” by providing a strong sense of “reassurance and nurturing” (G1) to which all are committed and recognise as important in managing the potential impacts of vicarious trauma. The team leader also has a specific function according to team members by being “willing to take the risk” to hear very traumatic information: “give it to me, I can hold you.” (B6)

For the Aboriginal staff, the intensity of the work is experienced differently to their non-Aboriginal colleagues, often because they carry the stories of the family at a deeper level. They will often know the histories and traumatic stories of families they are working with from their own family and community connections. There is a risk that they will “carry more pain” through the casework because the work means something different; it is more personal:

***“We want better for the clients ...we’ve often been there too.” (A2)***

This risk is known, and managed with a safe and supportive workplace culture. The safety to share these personal impacts comes from what is known and respected about each other:

***“We are comfortable with each other, we all know about each other’s kids, we connect through activities... it doesn’t feel like there are any secrets.” (A2)***

Non-Aboriginal staff understand that what the Aboriginal staff know (and feel) about the families will extend way beyond what is knowable for them.

There is a conscious decision by staff to keep some traumatic information within their pair (and sharing with the team leader only if that becomes necessary) to “limit the intensity of the work; to mitigate the impact of trauma on the rest of the team.” (B6)

***“There is so much informal debrief time, like in the car, that there are plenty of opportunities for us to look after each other. Most of the time, we share the feelings if we have experienced the same situation. If not, then we at least all know the context ... We also feel very safe to share difficult things [or our vulnerabilities] with the team leader. She has so much experience in this context so she knows to the extent of the challenges... We can all leave work at the end of the day and know that we have done everything we can.” (B6)***

### 3.4.2 Learning environment

***“We are learning constantly - from our clients, from other services, from each other.” (A3)***

The learning environment is one that is carefully managed and supported by the team leader, and by the team dynamic itself. It is based on the respect and value placed on each individual, and on the collective wisdom that arises from the team-based approach to practice. Staff spoke about the lack of “micro managing” that instils a trust both in individuals and in the team, providing a strong sense of “autonomy and professional trust.” (B5) This then allows staff to gain confidence and to keep learning:

***“Don’t be afraid to challenge yourself... Being valued and respected gives me great confidence. ...This is the team we work in”. (A3)***

The learning environment *permits* staff to expect to be valued for their unique contribution, whatever their knowledge base:

***“I want to work with people that don’t know it all”, where my input is needed and valued equally. “An [Aboriginal Worker] elsewhere will not know whether their input has been taken on board as the social worker holds all the decisions...” (A2)***

Rather than feeding the ego of individual staff, this permission communicates that all perspectives are to be valued thus providing confidence for all staff to contribute. It also comes with the expectation that staff must invest in their own learning and growing. Team members are encouraged to play to their strengths but also challenged to develop beyond these. This is important so that colleagues can continue to have confidence in each other. Staff also were keen to point out that while the team leader encouraged continual learning and often challenged individuals beyond their comfort zones, they never felt pushed too far.

***"We tell her if she is going too fast, or if she wants us to do too much. She listens." (A7)***

Staff learning and development beyond what occurs in the immediate team environment is equally valued and encouraged:

***"It's important to have other interests too like being on an external committee, or an internal one for Congress, be part of a research project or to do some course of study or training." (A3)***

Similarly, it is important for the team to have a shared project (such as preparing a presentation for a conference) to provide something to look forward to that contributes to motivation and growth of the team.

### 3.4.3 Parallel relationship modelling

***"It's like being with family." (B4)***

Parallel relationship modelling is very much a part of the team vocabulary. This is talked about and is a factor that assists the team to work through conflicts and disagreements. That these are inevitable provides a rationale for an openness to them when they do arise. To do otherwise would ignore the social relationships in any group situation, including the workplace and in families. Points of conflict or difference are thus turned into a tool for team development as well as almost a casework tool. For example:

***"...a good role modeling for our families is that we can respect each other, and we can disagree. But just because we have disagreement doesn't mean it results in anything more. We can show families, this is how we work with conflict." (B5)***

There is "no 'power over' experienced in this team" (A2) and this is also the experience that the team is consciously trying to provide in their work with families. Staff adopt a non-confronting work manner at all times, such as speaking calmly and softly and without complication.

This positive relationship modelling extends even to how external parties are spoken about in the workplace. Team members are aware of the "differences between debriefing and blaming" and the language associated with each. Debriefing can be done in such a way as to acknowledge and alleviate the stressors felt by working with partner organisations, but if workers are frustrated about something that hasn't gone well to the point that they can't talk to colleagues constructively about these issues, then it is likely that these workers similarly will find it difficult to talk to families in a constructive manner. "You use the same skills that you use when you have a difficult conversation with the parent, as you do with a service provider". (B8) In this way, genuine respect for others is maintained.

***"It's how the team functions as a team that models the respect we want families to have for each member." (G3)***

### 3.4.4 Service respect

Staff speak of the respect for their service they feel from the families with whom they work, from other teams within Congress, and often from external agencies. Even though the service is a unit within a much larger organisation, and thus have a hierarchy through which they are accountable, they feel a sense of autonomy within the organisation. This respect, both within the organisation and externally has been earned from the work they do, and from the respect that they hold for others.

Another enabler and indicator of this service respect stems from paying staff above award. This contributes to staff retention, which in turn enables the team to strengthen and grow its collective skills and knowledge.

Service respect describes the respect held for the service, as well as the respect the service holds for other agencies. External relationships are valued and nurtured as they are partners and resources for families. These respectful relationships are consciously modelled for clients and families as well as for other agencies working with them. This can be very frustrating for staff when others don't do the same.

***"The way in which we practice in a partnership with child protection... if you can get them to work collaboratively well, you can do some amazing work together in partnership - you just have to be really clear with your roles [of] each service, and workers need to be clear in their roles and responsibilities." (B8)***

For workers with experience in external agencies, particularly locally, the practice of the team is often in stark contrast to their experiences elsewhere. For example, where workers experience "...a lot of stress and duress, they sometimes end up like their clients and they get into a crisis mode. And when you're in a crisis mode, you resort to stressors and blaming." (B8)

All team members are aware of the impacts of this kind of behaviour amongst partner organisations, and all are conscious of avoiding language that could be construed as blaming. Instead, the practice is solution-focused:

**“...when we see a problem, how do we talk through that problem with the other service, so that we get back on the common ground and what’s in the best interest of the child and we do that through talking and communicating and building strong partnerships.” (B8)**

However, this is acknowledged as challenging when the experience of staff in participating in external meetings, advisory groups or local committees is that other’s understandings often only seem to be at a “*surface level*”, relative to the depth at which the team members feel that they understand the families and community context for their clients.

**“There are times when services come in and tell families what to do. And they try and scare or shame a family to makes changes ...That clearly is a conflict with what we believe in as a service and as practitioners in this team. ...We navigate through that and try to get services on board with working with families to provide them with some autonomy, but in a way that has very clear boundaries around things like safety...” (B5)**

One area where respect for external agencies is particularly challenging is that the team value and practice of working with men is not always shared with external agencies. For example, some team members have felt dismayed that male perspectives are not represented in important external fora.

If families are not regraded holistically, this can be interpreted as seeing men less worthy of engagement, and therefore disrespectful of Aboriginal values.

**“What I hear often is around keeping men accountable. Well, I don’t disagree with that, but you have to understand how behaviour change works - you can change behaviour through crisis, but people need to start to feel good about themselves, not about their behaviour, but about themselves, to then help get them to reflect and want to change.” (B8)**

These issues are openly discussed with the team, and are challenged externally as much as possible, always ensuring that relationships with partner organisations are kept positive and collegial on the families’ behalf.

### 3.4.5 Physical features

Simple features have been incorporated into the workplace to support the right working environment. This includes staff all working in one room (with the exception of the team leader who has a private office) with a shared table in the centre of the room. This encourages a collective identity and equality amongst the team:

**“The set up reflects what we are trying to build.” (B4)**

A prominent feature of the room is a large painting by one of the Aboriginal staff (SL) that articulates the team values and goals, and is a highly valued team artifact.

Another simple feature is the use of shared calendars, where use of time is transparent, negotiated and everyone’s time is valued equally.



“The Story on the Canvas is a Story of Children, families and people sitting down together, walking along with each other working together.

Communicating together and following the 9 Rules of Engagement that is represented in the Rules on the painting.”

Artists: Anna Pope, Michael Jungala and Sonya Pitjard

## 3.5 TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

The service pays constant and detailed attention to ensuring shared values, high standards and expectations of professionalism, recruiting and developing the right people for the work, and to the work environment. All of these factors are conducive to a way of working that has proven optima for the service's context and clientele – a 'transformative' practice. Particular features are evident and these are described in the sub-themes below.

### 3.5.1 Deep learning

A genuine learning environment is in place, and the continual feedback loops ensure that learning happens at a deep level. The team leader practices reflective questioning, and team members practice this on each other, never allowing assumptions to be made or opinions or 'positions' to be uninformed. For example:

***"How do you know that?' 'How did you see that?' 'What did they say that could have meant something else?' [staff are encouraged] to look at things through a different lens. I think that's really important. Because we make a lot of assumptions. Like, 'how do you know that?' 'what informed you' 'who did you check in with' 'did you consider?' 'have you asked?' 'have you spent time?'" (B8)***

Team members are clear that the team leader role is important to keep perspectives in balance, as well as to keep staff accountable in their professional practice. This is particularly important in the local context, and all staff share a sense of responsibility to offer the kind of support that will avoid the state of overwhelm and instead enable deeper learning:

***"We are supported around how to navigate the complexity of families, and the system". (B5)***

Deep learning comes from attending to the known challenges of the context of work, and from the learning environment fostered in the service. Problems are always considered learning opportunities and there is never a sense of shame attached to something having gone wrong:

***"...you come into a model like this, and it's like it's really good when you're wrong, it's strange, but it feels good. There's no ego here." (G2)***

***"...it's a safe place, the relationships at work. We can identify [our] weakness and feel supported to do that... It's structured for this." (B6)***

In this way, knowledge and confidence (including a comfort with 'not knowing') interact with each other ensuring each individual's growth as well as the collective knowledge of the team:

***"When stagnation [of knowledge growth] happens people often feel like they need to justify themselves. ...rather than actually trying to look at the best way to practise; it's all about I can justify my position and why I'm here, rather than this is what I'm trying to achieve... these are their hopes and I want to help them to get to those." (G2)***

### 3.5.2 Problems embraced

Problems and challenges that inevitably occur where people work together are dealt with openly and respectfully. The culture of the workplace enables the team to attend to these occurrences, and if they were not, that enabling culture itself would be eroded:

***“We can have differences about what we think about how to approach with the non- Aboriginal staff [internally and externally] but where we have the solid foundation of a respectful relationship; we can move through that and come to a shared understanding of what is going on and what needs to go on”. (A9)***

***“The relationships with all the other workers in really important. [We all] put the effort in... Then we have some flexibility when things aren’t going so well. There is a good foundation to allow for that.” (B6)***

***“How many rows have we had over the years? But we always get over them and move on, with respect.” (G3)***

When problems arise with external agencies, these are also not glossed over. If they were ignored, they may turn into even larger problems:

***“Sometimes there is a little tension around people we work with. It’s hard to be diplomatic all the time. We can get into a bit of a whinge fest with each other sometimes, but mainly this about our frustrations working in the system as a whole like polices and funding confines.” (A3)***

Allowing for these feeling to be expressed is a way of acknowledging the inevitable challenges of working in the central Australian context, and these discussions are (usually) quickly transformed into constructive debriefing and learning opportunities.

### 3.5.3 Motivation and empowerment

When staff are motivated and empowered, some impressive results can be achieved, and all staff feel that are part of “*something special*”:

***“We do a lot of cool things.” (A3)***

***“It is a privilege to work here, there is so much wisdom that comes from the lived experience of the [Aboriginal staff]. Working alongside my colleagues – this is what drew me to this team.” (B6)***

Motivation and empowerment result from all the values and the trust instilled in the individual workers and in the team-based approach to practice, particularly through the bi-cultural pairs. Staff are challenged and held accountable by the high professional standards which are supported by the team culture and the structures and processes in place. However, this way of working is only suitable for a “*certain kind of person*” (G1). For example:

***“You have to want to... hear their stories and to value deep connection.” (B4)***

***“This way of working, you are in for the long haul. The small changes for us are the great stepping stones for them. We work from where the family is at, not where we would like them to be. We are allowed the time, not like in other agencies that want outcomes and results in certain times.” (A2)***

Practice standards are high, fit for context, and in constant development as a result of the continual learning that takes place. Rather than a bi-cultural model allowing for different levels of professionalism to be tolerated, as has been the experience in other workplaces, the expectations are the same. This includes Aboriginal workers expecting high standards of both their non-Aboriginal colleagues as with their Aboriginal ones:

***“I’m not interested in how people answer questions, I’m interested in how they do something, after they’ve answered the questions – people need to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.” (A9)***

All staff feel motivated and empowered in their practice. And they feel encouraged and supported by their team leader and by their colleagues. While there are times when they can feel overwhelmed or despondent about casework outcomes or difficult relationships with external agencies, the team structures and culture allow for these moments, but then provide a way out of them.

### 3.5.4 Client and family centred

The ability to be family centred is both a value and a practice that is enabled by the bi cultural pairs. Without the insights provided by the cultural knowledge at play in the casework, the ability to be family-centred would be absent. The "many eyes" (A9) and many understandings ensure that the small wins (which can be turned into strengths to be built on) are noticed, but equally something not going well will be noticed:

***"We can pick up subtleties in families that the other [non-Aboriginal] staff may not see." (A2)***

***"Us Aboriginal family workers bring a deep understanding of cultural childrearing practices. Our job is to contextualise the child rearing practices we see." (G3)***

The absence of a deficit lens in case discussions is a source of pride for team members. The attention to deep listening is more likely to create a foundation for families to describe strengths in their own way and to build a language of strengths for the family. Staff all acknowledge that deep listening is hard to do, but all agree that "assumptions have to be called out or it won't happen." (A9)

Staff are adamant about not forcing anything on families. There is no set of questions to cover, and no expectation of how a family visit should unfold. This is known as "being time" in the team's lexicon, respecting both the "formal and informal worlds":

***"We get more when we are just 'with' clients with no agenda to get a particular outcome... But we are always working with intent." (B4)***

This ability to be family centred for these complex clients flows from the strong values of the team, and informed by the Aboriginal knowledge deeply embedded in practice, including the holism practiced by the team, in particular inclusive of men. And, it also reflects the genuine respect that staff have for their clients as whole people: "We have a laugh with clients; we let them live in their homes the way they want" (A7), all the time keeping child safety as the goal.

For some team members with experience working in more traditional family and children services, they would find it hard to readjust if they were to change workplaces:

***"It would be hard to go back now though, now that I've seen this way of working" that enables us to be so family centred. (B1)***

### 3.5.5 Slow and intentional pace

***"The initial stages of building a relationship is key. We are given the time to do this – it's embedded". (B4)***

Staff identify that the engagement phase of working with a family generally takes three to six months, and sometimes can be even longer before a good working relationship is established. This time is allowed, even expected. A slowed pace is more likely to enable the family to build a trust in the service, and a meaningful case plan can then be developed with the family. Staff see the value of relationships and trust when these have been allowed to build over time. They also understand that disclosures happen gradually and would not happen at all without a foundation of trust.

When a case plan is not making a difference over a period of time, then a small change will be made, such as changing caseworker or the nature of a home visit, and then allowing the time to see if that makes a difference. Over time a range of strategies can be tried until a 'small win' is seen. That then becomes a strength to be celebrated and built on:

***"You look at different ways you could do something – allow the time to see if it makes a difference". (B8)***

However, other services often want and expect to see changes too quickly and can get frustrated when this doesn't happen. Ideally, case plans are built on a thorough knowledge of a family and the trust that family has in the staff. All staff were clear this process can't be hurried, and is one of the features of their approach that sets this service apart from others.

***"Positive changes within the family... they can be very slow, are far between, but when they happen, its 'wow'." (A2)***

The slowed pace is both an articulated practice value and a function of working in pairs:

***"I think it slows the work down. It makes us a lot more critical in our thinking about how we work with families, especially for high needs and complex families. It makes us very thorough..." (B5)***

When practice is slowed down to the extent that it is, there is a greater 'noticing' of what's going on for families. This in turn, leads to a deeper understanding and altered practice. That staff bring their wholes selves to their casework further contributes to the ability to be family focused:

***"I always want to assist people with their parenting side, like I did mine. I have a feeling for what they might be going through. ...I want better things for them." (A7)***

The contribution from the Aboriginal staff in this respect can be profound because of their personal experiences in the local context. The slow and intentional pace is thus informed by layers of personal experience as well as from practice experience in the professional domain.

### 3.5.6 Knowledge co-creation

The bi-cultural model of working in pairs, along with the carefully fostered learning culture, creates a space for knowledge co-creation. This is more than a simple knowledge exchange as might be implied by the term bi-cultural'. While 'both ways' learning is still present, there is also a distinctive creation of new knowledge and an acceptance of knowledge as 'communal'. The merging of cultures and worldviews and other diversities present in the team are all part of the mix:

***"It's that because each of us are individually complex people outside of our defined roles - Indigenous or Western [knowledge] - and because we have collective life experiences sometimes via gender, age or cultural background - and we are acknowledging each other's life experiences... It is not just about Aboriginal family workers telling the caseworkers what this is about and the caseworkers telling the Aboriginal workers what this is. That would be a stagnant process. Rather it is a constant learning because of the complex life stories that individuals bring and that we collectively acknowledge and respect." (G2)***

Thus, rather than a binary representation of knowledge, complexity is shared and honoured and creates a space for the team to build knowledge together.

***"The collective [knowledge] is really good – there are different staff with different expertise that complements each other... It's the dynamics of the team... It's how you bring that team together to be a cohesive team that then gets amazing results. You've just got to look at their strengths." (B8)***

It is also worth noting that in the current makeup of the team, Western professional knowledge is not the exclusive domain of non-Aboriginal staff. As each learns the language and concepts of the other, knowing of 'the other' is deepened, which in turn contributes to the potential for knowledge co-creation. In this way knowledge growth happens both horizontally ('both ways') and builds vertically ('up-ways'), thus constantly building team and individual staff member's knowledge and capability.

***"We are constantly threading and weaving between, and with, each other's knowledge." (G3)***



Gabriel and Thompson

## 3.6 SUMMARY

The success of this team demonstrates that transformative practice results from a combination of having the right values, people, practice, and environment, with all of these features working in interaction with each other. However, transformative practice itself is multifaceted and possible only through the interaction of its components. We have described the components of transformative practice as deep learning, embracing problems, motivation and empowerment, being client and family centred, working at a slow and intentional pace, and knowledge co-creation within the team. This complex interaction of both the features underpinning the service, and the elements of transformative practice (what has been achieved) is represented in diagram 2 (*The Congress IFSS way*).

Diagram 2: **The Congress IFSS way**



# 4

## DISCUSSION

The paper now turns to discussing the IFSS way of working in more depth with a particular focus on the areas which demonstrate its distinctiveness in this sector, and which the team feels need to be better understood by other service providers. The cultural interface, or third space is useful to help conceptualise the IFSS ways of working, as are culturally safe and trauma-informed practice as these are key enablers of the transformational practice evident. Other enablers of the IFSS way of working are reflection (and critical reflection), and the idea of the co-present team which seems to explain the kind of leadership at work that both enables and interconnects all the elements that have been identified in the IFSS way of working and transformational practice they have achieved.



Thompson

### 4.1 THE THIRD SPACE

As demonstrated earlier (3.5.6), while there are distinct knowledges that require expertise as represented by the caseworker and Aboriginal family worker categories, it is not simply a binary representation of knowledge that underpins the service. Rather, there is a complexity created by the team dynamic, the practice model (where the knowledge of clients and families is also honoured), and from the team's values and processes of working. Instead of two sets of knowledge bases exchanging information horizontally alone, the bi-cultural model has developed its own culture that has created a 'both ways' and 'up ways' learning process. For example, two of the Aboriginal staff have formal social work qualifications, and thus have access to both knowledge bases – the Aboriginal, cultural knowledge as well as the Western knowledge that underpins the social work profession. The formal qualification does not shift the locus of knowledge from one to another, thereby reducing the need for bicultural pairs. Attainment of formal (codified) knowledge leads to further enhancement and enrichment, providing new language and concepts for the Aboriginal workers to assist non-Aboriginal workers to grasp concepts within the Aboriginal cultural domain that they may have previously been unable to describe with the depth and patience that their own deepening understanding of social work has provided.

At this point, it is useful to consider what has been described elsewhere as the 'third space'. This is the space that is shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in human services, and it is the space that will often reinforce Western oppression and domination and be culturally unsafe for Aboriginal people. However, this space can also offer the potential for transformation as long as the differences in world views and knowledge systems (ways of being and knowing) that operate in the intersections can be identified and transcended to move to the commonalities of purpose that have brought them together in the first place (Bessarab & Forrest, 2017). It is "the understanding, acceptance, problem solving and moving forward" where the change happens (Bessarab & Forrest, 2017, p.13). These are clear features of the IFSS program and way of working, and are firmly embedded in their team's culture. Nakata (2007) calls this complex space the 'cultural interface', a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of many different elements. It is the way these elements come together that creates the conditions for legitimising what is brought to the space and ultimately the knowledge co-creation and transformational thinking that can result. As team members themselves observe, Aboriginal cultural values - for example that knowledge is collective, embodied, localised and sometimes entrusted (Muller, 2014; Nakata, 2008) - has 'permeated' into the team culture itself seemingly to allow for the major differences in ontologies (ways of being) and epistemologies (ways of knowing) to become the source of innovation rather than struggle.

All team members clearly articulate the importance of valuing their respective knowledge bases. Thus, rather than making any assumption about which knowledge has the greater validity, the team culture is such that they meet at an equal level at the cultural interface, the site of transformative practice. Thus, the focus shifts from assuming or proving the superiority of one knowledge base over another to identifying opportunities for linking both and for building new knowledges and ways of understanding and being.

In addition to the codified knowledge of social and welfare work and the Aboriginal cultural knowledge that the two staff groups bring to the interface, they bring the ways of knowing that they uniquely access from other areas of their own lives (age, gender, cultural and family history, parenthood, past and current personal joys and challenges etc.). The team's ability to do this rests at least in part on the culturally safe space they have created for themselves, and represents major progress from 2014, when it was recommended that the roles of the case workers and Aboriginal Support Workers should be reviewed to better ensure that their respective skills knowledge and capabilities are fully utilised for the benefit of families and in a way that all staff feel highly valued (Segal & Nguyen, 2014). This process may have been further assisted by the fact that as Congress is Aboriginal controlled and many were in positions of power in the broader organisation, building in processes to ensure Aboriginal workers in the team were not seen as subordinate, as has been the experience of members of the team in other organisations, may have been more straightforward. Their contribution is (now) essential, unique and regarded on equal terms as the contribution of the non-Aboriginal workers.

From this account, it can be seen that knowledge co-creation occurs at the cultural interface, and this space is growing. It is a space where the formal and informal worlds are valued. There is a confidence that comes not from what staff know, but what they know together - a collective knowing. Further, what is not known is also 'honoured' so the space for co-creation is further opened up, and here whole selves are drawn upon openly (male, parent, age, trauma survivor, different experiences of and levels of local cultural exposure, professional experience, bi-cultural upbringing). This is the complex space that is the rich environment for knowledge co-creation.

Although it is unlikely that this effect could have been foreseen when the program first commenced, it is clear that there is so much more going on this space than a 'both ways' sharing of knowledge.

## 4.2 REFLECTIVE PROCESSES

Moon (1999, p.10) defines reflection as a basic form of mental processing with either a purpose or an outcome or both, applied in situations where material is “ill-structured or uncertain and where there is no obvious solution”. Others consider reflection a form of mindful consideration that requires both deliberate attention and a pause in action or thought to do so (Hewson & Carroll, 2016). Mezirow (cited in Garrick, 1998) describes reflection as a justification for one’s beliefs to guide action and to reassess approaches to problem-solving, but makes a distinction with *critical reflection* which focuses on the validity underpinning those belief structures (Garrick, 1998). Importantly, reflection is closely related to both thinking and learning (Moon, 1999) with reflective practice implying that mindful consideration has resulted in learning and a consolidation of practice (Hewson & Carroll, 2016).

Reflection and critical reflection are constantly in motion in this team, and structures and values are in place to ensure this is the case. Team members spoke frequently about the reflective discussions and reflective thinking that they engage in in all aspects of their work. These were both formally structured (such as case discussions) or occurred informally (such as in the shared office space). Even if they occurred informally, there seemed to be an intent to create the space for reflective opportunities. For example, the service’s operations manual states that staff should not visit more than two families on one trip to ensure “a break in between to review the previous visit and prepare for the next one” (Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, 2017). As was clear from team members accounts of their paired working arrangements, the shared car journey to return to the office is often a critical time for debriefing. In this way, the processes that support reflection are built into the physical environment of the workplace and operational procedures. It should also be noted that these same procedural requirements may have more than one purpose. In this case, the deliberate staging of time between home visits, would also assist with managing vicarious trauma risk making sure staff have time for ‘coming down’ from any heightened state that may have arisen for one or both staff members in a challenging home visit.

Reflective practice, as it is often understood in the professional human services domain, implies the use of questioning to focus attention on possible assumptions or biases and alternative ideas to situations or actions.

Particularly in supervision, reflection comes with certain approaches to questioning that surfaces different thoughts and perspectives allowing the supervisee to reframe and learn from the situation under discussion (Hewson & Carroll, 2016). Critical reflection in particular enables people to reframe problems they may be experiencing and to see different perspectives, leading to different solutions and understandings and consolidation of this learning into practice. This is an important process (and skill) at work at the cultural interface, as it supports a focus on the *validity* underpinning beliefs structures (and ways of being and knowing). However, it is worth noting that the questioning style of reflective practice, particularly in formal supervision, team meetings and case discussions, may seem at odds with Aboriginal forms of communication where direct questioning may be uncommon and even culturally unsafe (such as the use of storytelling and circularity as described by the Aboriginal team members). Although reflective practice is a Western tool belonging to the ‘professional’ human services domain, it may be assumed that it has been brought to the cultural interface in a way that has enabled the Aboriginal staff to engage with it and use it for the purpose of integrating Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, and/or that the Aboriginal staff have developed skills in processes of reflective practice as they are commonly understood in formal human services.

Some commonalities of purpose may help to explain the integration of reflective practice. The notion of collective knowledge in Aboriginal societies may be relevant as in teams there is high value in ‘collaborative reflection’ where tuning into others’ value systems is necessary, particularly interprofessional or multidisciplinary teams (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009) or simply where there are different underlying belief systems. This ability to tune into and respect others’ underlying values is clearly at play in the Congress IFSS way of working. And this aligns closely with the notion of respect signifying the equal regard given to each person, where individual difference, knowledge and capacity are a valued part of their personhood (Muller, 2014). This is one area that deserves further attention, but for now, it is clear that the Congress IFSS way of working includes the comfortable co-existence and co-application of processes of reflective practice.

## 4.3 CULTURALLY SAFE AND TRAUMA INFORMED

Cultural safety is an approach or philosophy that requires an examination of one's own culture and its impact on others through the principles of reflection, decolonisation, examination of power and privilege (Taylor & Guerin, 2019). It refers to the factors that derive from culture, belief systems or world views that contribute to a person feeling safe in the world in which they live (Atkinson & Atkinson, 2017). In human services, it refers to how safe clients and workers of the minority culture feel to express their cultural identity within the service or work environment (Zon et al., 2004). As the term encompasses a broad definition of culture to include the values and mores associated with professional background, age, gender, ableness and so on, it is relevant in any situation where a power differential may exist. Culturally safe practice acknowledges the diversity of worldviews that exist within and between cultural groups and for human services workers requires embracing the concept of providing care that is regardful of all that makes a person unique, not regardless. To be regardful is to take into account the unique aspects of an individual that require consideration, rather than applying simple universal approaches that aim to treat everyone the same (Taylor & Guerin, 2019). Culturally safe practice relies on critical self-reflection as the key to understanding how power imbalances contribute to a sense of safety. This includes in systemic processes, in workplaces between staff members, and where power imbalances are present for consumers such as between the professional/ service deliverer and the receiver (Clark et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, cultural safety is required for the cultural interface to function in the way that it does in the Congress IFSS way of working.

It is now recognised that a deeper focus on understanding and addressing the level of trauma that permeates Aboriginal communities is required to break the cycles of family and cultural disruption (Menzies, 2019). This includes ensuring that service provision is informed by trauma frameworks to support trauma informed care. Trauma informed care generally prescribes a set of basic principles such as safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment which are consistently interwoven and applied throughout the whole process of providing care (Levenson, 2017). When integrated into practice, these principles are thought to minimise the likelihood of repeating dysfunctional dynamics in service delivery and create an opportunity to provide a more positive or "corrective" experience for service users (Levenson, 2017). These principles align closely with the values and approach to practice demonstrated by all team members. Cultural safety comes into play here too, especially in the way that it is enacted in the styles of communication with families. Ensuring a safety - *a safe place* - enables people to find and tell their own stories in their own way, the first step in trauma recovery for Aboriginal people (Atkinson & Atkinson, 2017).

In further keeping with trauma informed care, workers are very careful to interact with clients from a place of genuine respect and authenticity, and never putting pressure on clients to disclose information they are not ready to share (Levenson, 2017). With the trust built up between the client and workers over time, and through honouring cultural ways of communication and story-telling, deep listening can occur. This is the inner deep listening that comes from stillness, from accessing aspects of themselves that contributes to a stronger sense of identity and which can contribute to journeys of healing and recovery (Atkinson & Atkinson, 2017). This aligns with the team's approach to practice (such as the simple 'being time' with family members and styles of communication, and cultural respect). And it aligns with the workplace culture within the office environment:

***"We have that 'being time' with each other too. It's that parallel modelling again – what we do in the team is what do we in our practice, and it's what we want of the families we work with." (G4)***

The skill of providing the space for a person to tell their story without interruption is a way of communicating respect and a willingness to tune in and understand (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). This is important culturally safe practice that all team members say contribute to providing the foundation for a working relationship with their clients. Further, the slow and deliberate pace of the team builds in space for their own 'reflection in action' (Mann et al., 2009), in the moment, thus limiting the possibilities for their lenses or judgements to be brought to any automatic responses that may otherwise occur in their practice.

Clients need to experience environments and relationships that challenge their expectations of unsafe relationships and negative experiences of services. Safe relationships are consistent, predictable, and non-shaming (Levenson, 2017). Staff in the service very clearly demonstrate trauma-informed care through aspects of their practice such as modelling of respectful relationships, interpersonal boundaries, and careful use of language. Importantly, staff use their power only to establish safe and appropriate limits and consciously avoiding any possibly of "recreating the oppressive actions of others" (Levenson, 2017)p.109. The conscious focus on power in trauma informed care relates closely to the way power is understood in culturally safe practice, and clearly cultural safety must be present in trauma-informed care.

At this point, it is worth highlighting the team commitment to working holistically. Through their processes of knowledge co-creation, the team has developed a culturally safe and trauma-informed approach to practice. In large part, working holistically is understood by the team as ensuing all family members, including men, are given a voice, are understood and respected, but never losing the focus of the child. This is not to say that men are not held accountable for their actions. In fact, the opposite is true: *“the whole family is accountable when you are child focussed.”* (G4) Their inclusivity of men demonstrates a deep contextual understanding of the issues important for men and the violence experienced by the families the service works with. For example, in research conducted in central Australia (Brown et al., 2012), anger and impulsive acts of violence were found to be prominent features of depression in Aboriginal men, particularly in the context of continual efforts to suppress the anger they felt about what had occurred in their lives. This research found that escalating frustration is a common experience for many men and occurs against a backdrop of a sense of powerlessness to make significant changes within their lives (Brown et al., 2012). Staff were clear that the best chance of addressing negative behaviours such as violence was to ensure their work with families did nothing to contribute to such a sense of powerless, but rather to demonstrate respect and a commitment to all family members, including male perpetrators. Undoubtedly, the Aboriginal team members offer a depth of perspective that can be accessed through their way of working - bringing their whole selves and individual experiences to the fore and having this safely acknowledged and respected within the team. This contextually-rich practice frames family violence with Aboriginal ‘terms of reference’ resulting in a “holistic community way” of viewing and working with the issue (Briskman, 2007).

## 4.4 THE CONGRESS IFSS WAYS OF WORKING – THE CO-PRESENT TEAM

Congress IFSS has a particular way of working that includes the bi-cultural pairs and solid professional standards. However, as has been demonstrated, this is not a form of professionalism defined by elitism inevitably “wielding power” because the processes are rooted in Western epistemologies and ontologies (Briskman, 2007). While the team is committed to the forms of professionalism associated with the social work discipline (assessment tools, reflection, supervision, case meetings and so on), their solidity is affirmed only by the integration of Aboriginal ways of being and knowing in the Congress IFSS way of working. This occurs through the bi-cultural practice model itself, but as has been discussed, this in turn relies on the other elements (values, people, environment) to ensure that the professional standards are firmly contextualised and therefore meaningful in their application.

At this stage it is important to comment on the characteristics of leadership present. Although the team leader herself was very keen to point out that the success of the team had little to do with her own style of leadership, all the other team members were very keen to highlight the qualities that they valued in her and which they felt contributed to the team’s success. Some align closely with the findings of the 2013 report (McGuinness & Leckning, 2013) which identified an operational manager’s success in managing bi-cultural teams is dependent on four key elements. These were: their awareness of connectedness to community; the extent to which they can protect their team from additional or excessive organisational or external demands; strong interpersonal skills; and the ability to select staff who are a good fit for the organisational model. Other qualities that have high value for the team include good supervision, engendering team spirit, commitment to standards of professionalism, as well as trauma-informed practice (including managing vicarious trauma (3.4.1)) and cultural safety, as already discussed. Good supervision was also highlighted frequently as an important leadership quality.

In many ways, leadership itself is a collective process, enabled by a particular style of leader. The process that can be identified in the team align with Hager and Beckett’s (2019, pp.145-146) account of decision-making as a non-linear process, “neither assumed to be horizontal (every opinion is equally authoritative), nor vertical (the only opinion comes from the top of a hierarchy)”. In their account, leadership is ‘distributed’: it arises through the contingencies of the case, or the ‘reading’ of the place. Leaders are those with the authority to direct attention to salient aspects of the situation: ‘look at it this way’; ‘I recognise these features—can others see these?’; ‘if we try this, we could ...’; and so on (Hager & Beckett, 2019). This form of non-linear style of leadership that makes use of and calls on the

expertise present with a group as the situation requires is a characteristic of what they term co-present groups. Such groups require "highly skilled performances and performers" who demonstrate "mastery of affective functioning across all members of the group" (Hager & Beckett, 2019, pp.146). For example, the attention to checking in with each other and with ensuring open communication is something to which all team members are committed, and skilled at.

The 'artful participation' of co-present groups align with the processes of reflection, peer supervision, managing personal and professional boundaries and so on, that have been discussed previously. In a co-present group, these skills work to ensure that decisions are collectively supported and "owned by all" (Hager & Beckett, p.146). Indeed, these are some of the characteristics that team members seek in recruitment, and that they nurture amongst each other constantly. The team dynamic that is created collectively creates safety for mistakes and vulnerabilities to be expressed without judgement. This dynamic is fiercely protected by all team members, and all see their value within the team environment and can attribute much of their own learning to this team culture. Different skill sets are not placed in a hierarchy of value. Rather, the skill sets work relationally without hierarchy, and thus leadership, although there is a designated team leader, is also distributed.

In this way, all team members could be regarded as being involved in leadership - these skills are nurtured in all - but it is the designated leader that has the role of managing up, and externally, and this is acknowledged by all team members. The team leader models the leadership qualities that is nurtured in others, including reflection, problem-solving, 'looking out' for vicarious trauma, and conflict resolution. There is a strong sense held by all staff that the team leader, and each team member, knows the team as a whole, as well as knows each team member as whole people. The team leader models the importance of these kinds of knowing of the team and its members. Thus, there is no territorialism felt or exerted about 'the leadership' role in its broadest sense, so each team member experiences a sense of responsibility for attending to the team dynamic that makes the service work.

Formal supervision is provided by the team leader regularly to each team member, and is practised in the style of reflective supervision (Hewson & Carroll, 2016). This frequent and individual form of supervision has been shown to be most effective for retaining practitioners, especially for social workers in areas of high trauma content (Cortis, Seymour, Natalier, & Wendt, 2020). Forms of peer supervision are also present in this workplace, and this includes 'cultural supervision' suggested elsewhere as significant in improving cross cultural practice (Lindeman, Dingwall, & Bell, 2014).

Cultural supervision is demonstrated by team members when they describe the Aboriginal staff witnessing and commenting on (in reflective feedback loops) the work of the non-Aboriginal staff from a cultural safety perspective.

Staff turnover is a pervasive and long-term problem for human service organisations in remote areas and in central Australia (Lindeman et al., 2014; Mason, 2010). This has many negative consequences, including directly on local Aboriginal staff who work in these organisations. Aboriginal staff are constantly called on to:

***"introduce a passing parade of non-indigenous staff to their culture and community; to answer their same old sometimes sensible, sometimes silly, but always important questions about local history and politics; culturally appropriate social responses; who's who in the community; why things are as they are, etc" (Zon et al., 2004, p.293).***

In these very common scenarios, the depth of learning required to create the conditions for transformative practice are unlikely to occur.

This team demonstrates what can be achieved when retention of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff reach a certain point of stability, long enough to enable the transformative practice to emerge. The team itself is unsure about the extent to which their practice approach can adequately be documented and passed on to new staff, and this is one of the main reasons for initiating the current project. It is also unclear what is the required critical mass that will ensure that practice continues at the current high standard and could continue to develop, and whether or not it is dependent on particular people. The latter issue has at least been settled by the conclusion that it is the entire set of conditions and their interrelationships, as outlined in the document, that is at the heart of the service, not dependence on one or combination of individuals currently employed in the team.

However, the continued evolution of the service has not been challenged by staff turnover to this point. In fact, the very conditions that contribute to a stable workplace have continued to develop and strengthen, and contributing to improve the conditions for staff retention and learning. One key feature that is undoubtedly at the core of this dynamic is that cultural safety for the Aboriginal workers is present in this workplace - they are neither outnumbered, outranked nor outpowered (Zon et al., 2004) - and this itself creates a stabilising effect. Critically though, is the team conviction of their purpose and shared vision:

***"Everything we do and the way that we do it, is for our clients. They are why we are here. They keep us centred. They are our purpose." (G4)***

## 4.5 CONCLUSION

The transformative practice of this team works beyond what may be implied by the bi-cultural model that officially describes their approach so is an insufficient way to describe what is practised by this team. As the team members bring their whole selves to the knowledge intersection, and as the knowledge grows 'both ways' and 'up ways', individually and collectively, the space of the intersection also grows.

The bicultural pairs are only the most basic ingredient for this space; it most certainly is enriched by, and dependent on, all the other features described previously as these enable the team to operate with such breadth and depth of knowledge. This is a 'co-present team', where effective leadership is modelled and dispersed, and because it is often non-linear requires a high level of affective functioning of all team members. The team works at the cultural interface, a highly functioning space for knowledge co-creation and holistic practice. It is also where culturally safe and trauma-informed approaches (underpinned by strong and contextualised approaches to reflection) provide the conditions for growth of both staff (and the team collectively) as well as the clients and their families. These are the significant points of difference of the Congress IFSS way of working and which warrant more recognition in the sector. Diagram 2 (below) brings all the identified features together.

It isn't clear that the Congress IFSS way of working can be transferred to an already established team. In the case of this service, the team started as it meant to continue, paying attention to continuous improvement (and maintenance where warranted) from the beginning and ever since. Further, there has been time for the team culture to be embedded and to develop depth of knowledge contextually unique to this service.

***“Enough time must be allowed before you can expect anything. This goes for developing the workplace culture that is needed, through to establishing relationships with clients and the subsequent work you can do with them. Time is critical to everything. Really, It’s about time.” (G4)***

However, at the very least, other organisations may benefit from understanding the features and elements as identified throughout this paper, and the processes at work to enable their interconnection to identify both points of difference and similarity in other workplaces and service models. As one of our critical peer reviewers suggested, this document can provide a foundational structure to enable processes to flow *“between, across and around different levels of approach that reaches, supports and provides direction for staff, client, workplace, and community”*.

Diagram 3: The Congress IFFS way of working and the co-present team



# 5

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



**Angela Hampton, Aboriginal Family Support Worker**

My name is Angela Hampton. I am a Yankunjatjarra woman and my people come from a small community called Mimili, in the remote North of South Australia. I also have many familial ties throughout the Northern Territory. I was born in Alice Springs and have lived there for most of my life. I have worked as an Aboriginal Family Support Worker with the Family Support Service [FSS], at Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in Alice Springs since 2013. Since November 2016, I have participated as a committee member of the Aboriginal Staff Advisory Committee. The committee provides input to Congress for the continual improvement of Congress services and programs with an emphasis on cultural safety, support and career development of Congress's Aboriginal workforce. I also sit on other committees and working groups whose aim is to improve services in our community.

With Congress's support, I will obtain a Bachelor of Social Work (Honors) with Deakin's National Indigenous Knowledges Education Research Innovation (NIKERI) Institute in Geelong, Victoria by the end of this year. My job is not only challenging, but is also extremely rewarding; which helps to drive my enthusiasm and dedication towards studying to become a Social Worker, so can continue to actively participate and contribute to improving my community and the outcomes for the families I work with.



**Dudley Clarke, Aboriginal Family Support Worker**

Dudley Clarke is from the Arabana and Kija people, was born and grew up in Alice Springs working in the area of youth, and family support services for over 15 years. He has a Cert III in Community Services and Graduate Cert in Developmental Trauma, complemented by over many years' experience working in the Department of Children and Families as an Aboriginal Community Worker. Dudley also has a wealth of knowledge having worked in education, youth services, health promotion and sport and recreation services.



**Chuong Le, Case Worker**

Chuong Le is originally born and raised in Melbourne to a Vietnamese family of immigrant/refugee backgrounds. Chuong has completed a Bachelor of Social Science (Psychology & Sociology) at Swinburne University of Technology & a Masters of Social Work from The University of Melbourne. Chuong has been working in the Family Support field of practice for the past 8 years, 6 of which have been with Congress in Alice Springs since 2015. Chuong's goal is to continue to support men & fathers be engaged in parenting in a safe and supportive space, as well as continue working with marginalized communities to empower wider change.



**Faith White, Aboriginal Family Support Worker**

Faith White is a Yankunjatjarra woman from the Southern Northern Territory region. Faith is a fluent bi-lingual speaker in Yankunjatjarra, Pitjantjatjarra, Southern Luritja and has an understanding of Arrernte. Prior to her current 7 years of service with Congress TFSS, Faith was employed for over 15 years as a bi-lingual Indigenous Service Officer at Centrelink. She has a Cert IV in Business and completed a Bachelor of Social Work Degree in 2019 through the then Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Geelong. Faith has an extensive knowledge of local and regional family kinship and language groups and has worked closely with Aboriginal families and children in both remote and urban settings for many years.



**Kirsty-Ann Tate, Caseworker**

Kirsty-Ann Tate joined the Congress Family Support Team in December 2018. She has a Bachelor of Social Work and a Bachelor of Arts in Aboriginal studies. Kirsty-Ann was born and raised in Alice Springs, moving away for a short period to complete her studies. She has been a Congress employee for several years prior to joining the team, working with Indigenous youth and those impacted by past removal policies.



**Lisa Schwer, Case Worker**

Lisa Schwer is a Case Worker with the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in the Family Support Service Team and has been for nearly 4 years. Lisa has experience predominately working in the Family Support area but also has worked in Child Protection, Out of Home Care, Counselling for Children and Young People, Child Advocacy, Homelessness and Domestic Violence Support. This experience is across 5 States and Territories of Australia. Lisa has a Bachelor of Arts (Welfare Studies) and a Graduate Diploma of Counselling (Children and Young People). Lisa enjoys the privileges and challenges of working in a Central Australian context. One of the privileges is working in bi-cultural pairs with Aboriginal staff.



**Melissa Lindeman, Project Officer**

Melissa works as a consultant and academic, based in Central Australia. She has extensive experience in health and community services, in policy and service development, research and education, and service management. She is currently employed by Charles Darwin University as Associate Professor in the College of Nursing and Midwifery, and holds academic status with Flinders University in the School of Medicine and Public Health.



**Pauline Hickey, Team Leader**

Pauline Hickey has 25 years' experience in working with vulnerable children and families in the Northern Territory. This includes 15 years with NT Child Protection in Darwin and Alice Springs, in various roles, including, Case Worker, Team Leader and Manager across a number of areas; operation child protection and policy and program development. In addition to this, Pauline has 10 year's experience with the non-government sector having worked with Relationships Australia and Anglicare in the youth area. For the past 7 year's Pauline has held the position of the Family Support Team Leader with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress. Qualifications include a Bachelor of Arts, Masters of Child and Adolescent Welfare and a Graduate Diploma in Clinical Supervision.



**Sonya Lemson, Aboriginal Family Support Worker**

My name is Sonya Lemson and I work with the Congress Family Support Team for 9 years as a Aboriginal Family Support Worker. My role is to support the families that I work with to strengthen their families and ensure the wellbeing and safety of their children, in our Formal worlds and in their Informal world settings. I have worked in Central Australia for many years (34 years) , as a Cultural Advisor (especially in school settings) Remote and at Yirara College and I was employed as a After Hours Youth Worker for 5 years in the CBD of Alice Springs with Congress. I speak Anmatyere, Alyewerre, Eastern Arrente and understand some Kaytetye language. These languages belong to tribal areas situated East and North East of Alice Springs. I also support Cultural training to staff in not only our Family Support Team but also in other areas of my role, to ensure the work that we do with Aboriginal families in Central Australia is culturally safe and appropriate.



**Tess Millerick, Case Worker**

Tess Millerick started working with Congress Family Support in August 2018. Tess studied Sociology, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Art Therapy, and is currently completing her Masters in Social Work. Prior to joining the team, Tess worked in Brisbane, Alice Springs and surrounding remote communities in the youth and family violence sector. Tess was born in Alice Springs and has lived there for most of her life.





Sonya and Rebecca with kids using yarning mat



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