



Brotherhood of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Engaging vulnerable families in universal early childhood services.

***Many stories, many challenges,
many answers.***

**Counteracting issues that
adversely impact on the community**

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This presentation...

- The work of the Brotherhood of St Laurence on the issue of child poverty and social exclusion of children in their early years
- The experience of a recent research project on addressing social inclusion in universal early childhood services
- Discussion of the way in which early childhood services can become more socially inclusive and help break cycles of poverty



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

How do you define vulnerable children and their families?

Multiple disadvantage

Many issues that impact on each other to lock people into cycles of disadvantage...

- Low income
- Young parents
- Sole parents
- Health, mental health and/or substance use problems
- Physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities
- Homelessness or inadequate housing
- Contact with child protection or criminal justice system
- CALD communities (particularly new arrivals and refugees)
- Indigenous families

Contradictions are everywhere...

- If we see the **child** as rich and strong and powerful how can we accommodate the powerless, the weak, the at risk child?
- If we see **families** as being competent, knowledgeable and able to contribute how can we accommodate the needy, powerless, struggling parent?

Defining Vulnerability...

Lists alone does not inform well –

- Does it need more than one attribute?
- Is it true only if its severe?
- How are positive attributes included?
- How do you include a non-personal deficit concept eg. poor services resulting in lesser benefits?
- How does racism, distrust, inequality impact on vulnerability?

Understanding vulnerability

Through the work of the Breaking Cycles Building Futures we have come to understand in terms of:

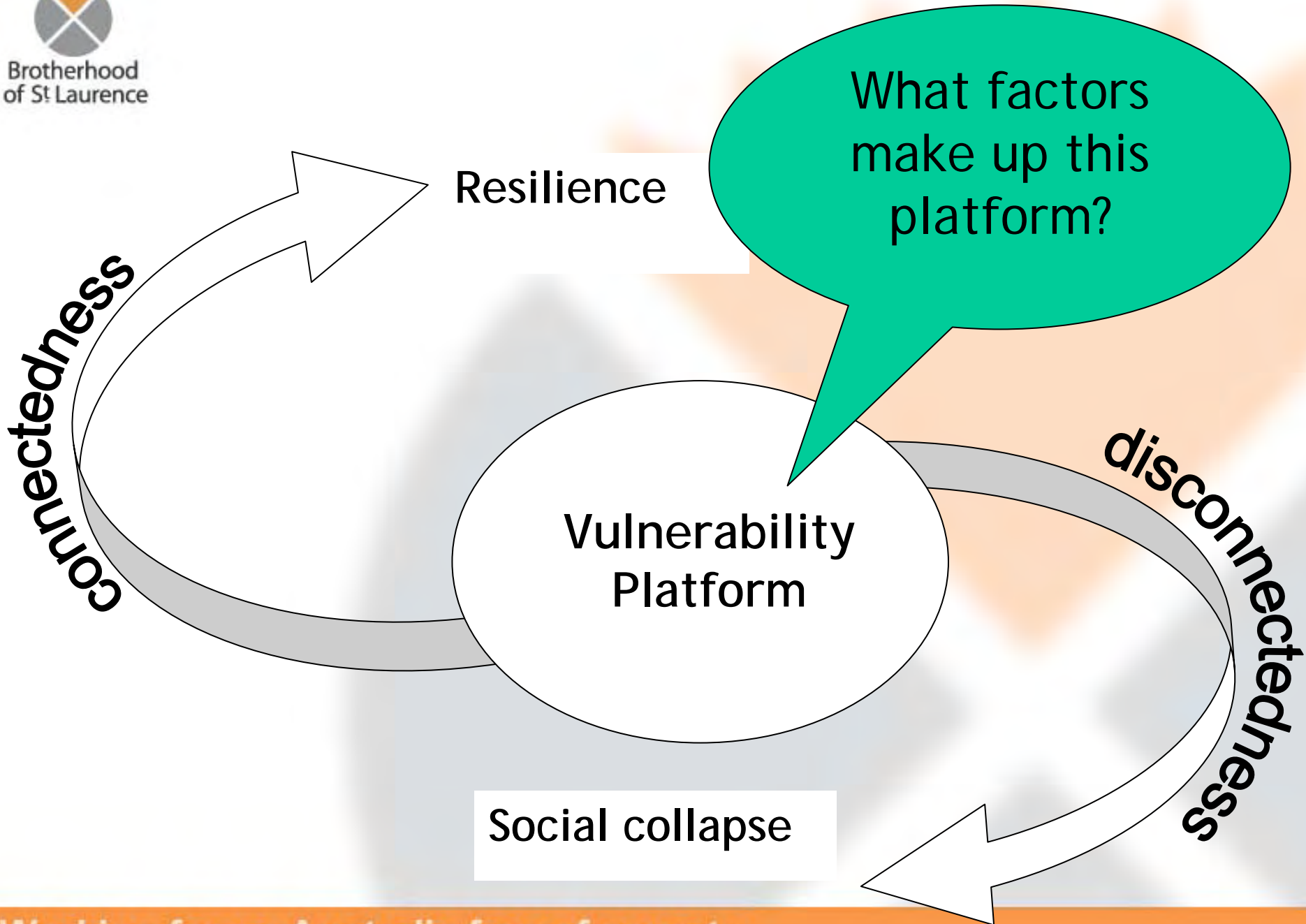
- disconnection
- lack of engagement with those things that can support you
- Past trauma has led to disconnection with family and community life
- social exclusion

Low income

- I had a dad ring up and say 'I was hoping to get my child into kinder', and thought he meant for this year, and he said, "no for now because I've thought he probably needs to have kinder before he goes to school". I said we've only got 4 sessions left, and he said, "oh, we couldn't afford to send him for the whole year". I just felt so sad that they'd obviously just said, "oh we might be able to afford 4 sessions".

Housing

- It is cheap housing, cheap rental accommodation, but that comes with its own problems because some of the parents are quite transient. So they might start living here for this term, and then, like I had a family this term that didn't come back after the holidays, and you try to ring and they've moved. So they can move house really quickly and I don't know whether they've now tried to get that child back into kindergarten or not.



What factors
make up this
platform?

Resilience

Vulnerability
Platform

Social collapse

What the research shows...

- ‘Our recent research shows that children born into disadvantaged social groups have an increased chance of low birth weight, poor physical growth and inadequate coping skills in the early years of school.

With such a poor start they are more likely to drop out of school, develop mental health problems and experience difficulty in finding and keeping a job’.

What does this mean for Children's Services

Poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, poor health and nutrition [etc] ... are the challenges hundreds of thousands of our youngsters and their families face every day.

It is no wonder that children bring more than educational needs into the classroom ...

Bruner et al. (1992, p.1)

High/Scope Perry Preschool project

The 'mid-life phase' where participants are now 40 years of age, concluded that:

- High-quality preschool programs for young children living in poverty contribute to their intellectual and social development in childhood and their school success, economic performance, and reduced commission of crime in adulthood.

(Schweinhart, 2005, p.5)

What is a socially inclusive service?

- Easy to reach and use and actively work to include all-comers.
- They acknowledge people's shared humanity,
- Celebrate diversity and
- Promote acceptance, belonging and participation.

What is a socially inclusive service?

- In their ideal form, inclusive services also act as agents for social change, working to overcome deprivation and disadvantage in order to promote social inclusion.

In other words they are Institutes of civil society...

Children's services can be seen as a cultural 'institution' 'open to *all* families ... both children and adults and to the world', whose main task would be to 'serve multiple purposes; as a means of inclusion, for children and adults, in civil society'. Dahlberg Moss and Pence 1999

Or loci of ethical practice...

‘The possibility is that these institutions can be understood, first and foremost, as forums, spaces or sites for ethical practice – as ‘loci of ethical practices’ and ‘minor politics’.

That these institutions can be places where the Other is not made into the Same, but which open up instead for diversity, difference and otherness, for new possibilities and potentialities ...

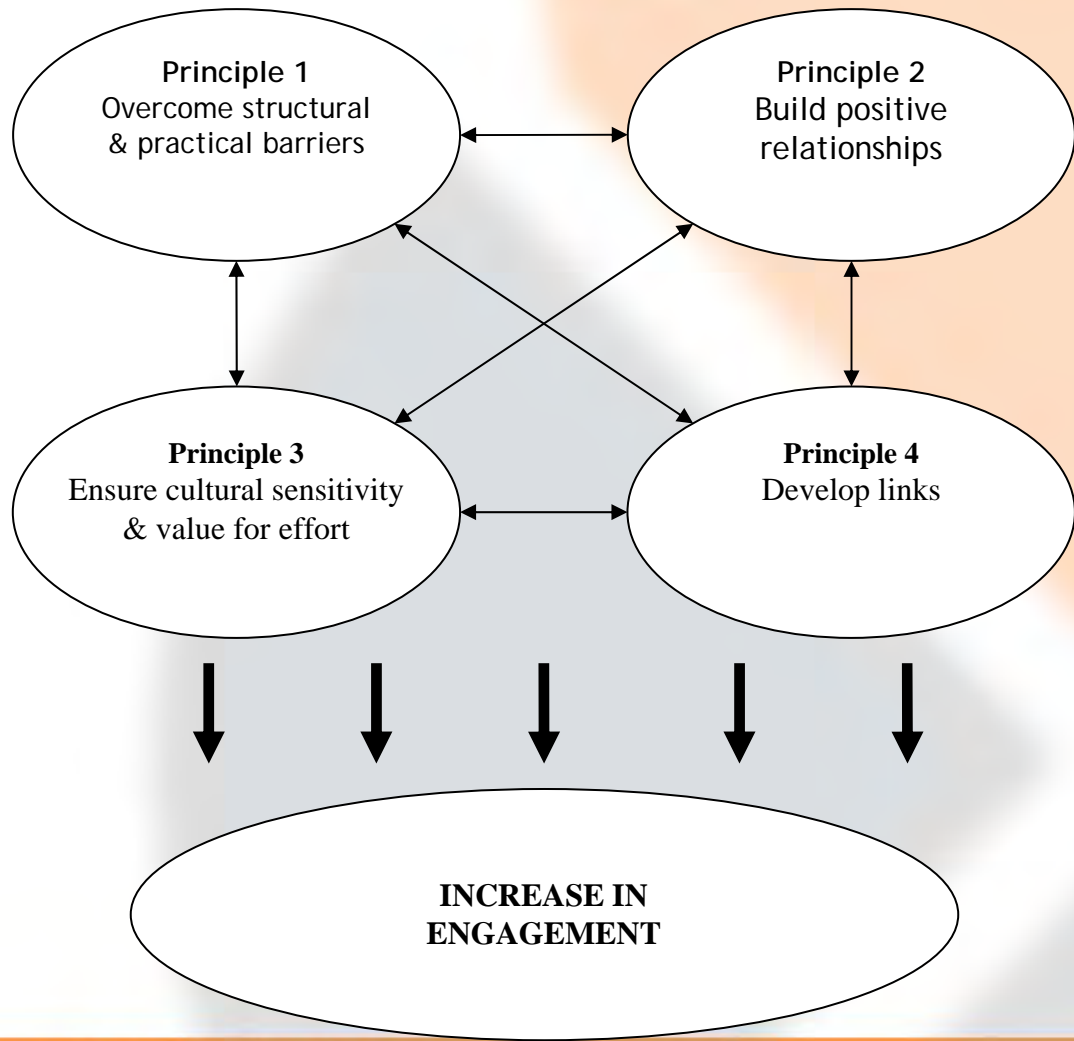
They can be places for confronting injustice, in particular structural domination and oppression.’

Dahlberg & Moss’ (2005)

Principles of the framework

- Principle 1 – Overcoming structural and practical barriers
- Principle 2 – Building positive relationships
- Principle 3 – Ensuring cultural sensitivity and value for effort
- Principle 4 – Developing links

Framework for developing strategies



For every centre...

- Since it is highly **unlikely** that a service will have no vulnerable children and parents amongst its potential client group, every service needs to establish these policies and practices.
- Services need to 'prepare' the service to attract families, rather than waiting to change once they are there.

Socially inclusive practice

- 'One person said to me, "oh I don't like going into some of those homes, they're so smelly"... 'Because our vulnerable families often are living in very chaotic situations and it's probably worse for somebody with those sort of feelings to go into those homes.

It actually makes it worse for the vulnerable family, I believe, in most cases because it actually makes them more aware of the fact that they're not acceptable.'

Socially inclusive Practice...

- In the [centre] there would be people your age, not having all these ... couples in their mid-30s [who are] married, they've got the house, they've got the car, they've got the careers and everything's good', 'you meet new people your own age and they have kids as well', 'even if you don't get to know them, just walking in there and being able to feel confident, not be scared like you're some kind of freak', and the staff were 'really friendly' and 'wonderful'.

Socially inclusive Practice...

- You have to be really approachable. Some parents, they like to know that you're going to be kind and not judge them, and when they say "I haven't got any money" or they come and they've got no shoes ...
Like I've got this mum who always comes with no shoes on and the first day I saw her I thought her appearance is just dreadful, but I just said to her that frost will get your toes, and she thinks that's really funny, but really she should have shoes on. But you need to be welcoming and kind.

Inclusive strategies...

- Information - translated and inviting brochure
- Promotion
- Professional development
- Facilitated playgroup
- Outreach to new families moving into public housing
- Strategies were developed at different stages at each site.
- Strategies around relationships were more difficult to determine but were deemed to be almost the most important factor.
- The compounding nature of the strategies is critical – several smaller strategies feed larger ones
- Many of the strategies were very simple but were seen to make a big difference

Insights from the project...

- Vulnerable families remain the **most complex** to engage and the most challenging to keep connected
- Key **people** make the difference
- Leverage is a **critical** issue
- Several **strategies (a suite)** will be needed each developed to match individual communities
- Vulnerability needs **resourcing**
- Being inclusive requires constant **examination** of theory and practice
- Reaching vulnerable families and their children takes **time**
- Community **promotion** is underestimated

Ongoing barriers

- cost of kindergarten
- insufficient services and specialist supports
- attitudes of both service providers and parents
- domestic violence
- substance abuse
- ability to 'find' many vulnerable families
- language and literacy barriers
- lack of belief in the importance of kindergarten
- unstable housing or homelessness
- mental health issues including particularly postnatal depression
- Poverty – low or no income
- intergenerational issues, particularly in the Aboriginal community.