



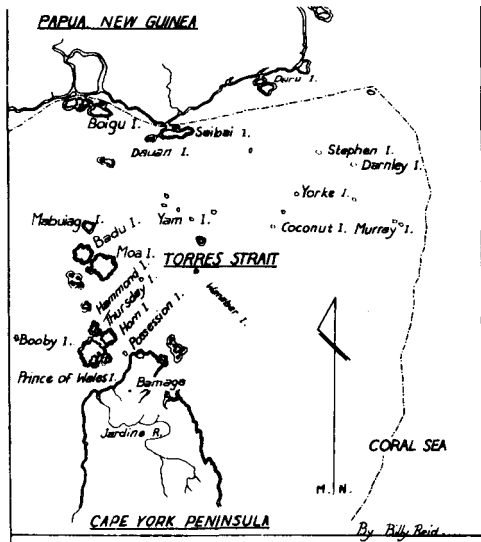
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:
THE SAIBAI STATE SCHOOL
EXPERIENCE

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The purpose of this report is to investigate the need for and purposes of parental and community involvement in an Outer Torres Strait Island school, namely Saibai State School, and to explore and report on some of the approaches to community involvement that we have trialled in our school.

If a school is aiming to educate its students for an active role in the society, then it is vital that the school be a living, active part of that society. It is unrealistic for teachers to assume that the school can stay separated from the community but still educate its students in a real and meaningful way.

Dwyer (1977) emphasises the enormous gap which exists between many schools and the communities they serve when he states:

Many schools are like little islands set apart from the mainland of life by a deep moat of convention and tradition. Across the moat there is a drawbridge which is lowered at certain periods during the day in order that the part-time inhabitants may cross over to the island in the morning and back to the mainland at night. Why do these young people go out to the island? They go there in order to learn how to live on the mainland.

After the last inhabitant of the island has left in the early afternoon the drawbridge is raised. Janitors clean up the island and the lights go out.

Dwyer, 1977.

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If the school is to be seen as just part of the continuing educational process that we all undertake throughout our entire life, then it is vital that the gap between schools and communities be reduced. Parental involvement in the education process at all levels will greatly assist in reducing this gap and assist the intermarriage of school education and home education.

Parental involvement in the school/education process increases accountability by the school and thus increases the likelihood that programs will reflect community needs and aspirations. Grotberg (1972) states that -

The degree to which parents participate in both the decision-making process and the educational process of an institution may well determine the level of the effectiveness of the institution.

(Grotberg 1972, p.337)

Parental involvement in the educational process also has definite advantages for individual children. Children who observe their parents valuing the school through their own active participation, are also likely to display values similar to those of their parents and thus increase their interest and application in their own education. Gordon supports this claim by stating:

- d) children learn best when home and school share in the educational experience; [and]
- g) when parents are actively involved in the education of their children they will continue to enhance the child's growth and their own activity after the formal program ends.

(Gordon, 1972, p.221)

By involving parents in the education of their children, the school can assist parents to develop their own parenting skills, academic skills and sense of self worth. Gordon again supports this claim in stating:

- f) parents themselves gain in self-esteem and feelings of competence when they see themselves able to teach others - both adults and children - and to function as decision-makers in all respects of a program.

(Gordon, 1972, p.221)

Parental involvement can thus far be seen to have two key advantages for education:

First - children see the school's education as being more valuable because of the contribution their parents are making, and

Second - parents gain in self worth and skills as they work actively to support education.

Fitzgerald and Pettit (1978) summarize a further advantage if parental involvement leads to participation in school decision-making -

...the opportunity for people to participate in the making of school policy may engender a sense of commitment otherwise lacking in imposed approaches. In accord with such an objective, the first priority may be academic success or alternatively personal competence.

(Fitzgerald and Pettit, 1978, p.25)

Whilst this is a general argument to support parental involvement in all schools, which certainly has implications for the educational administration, such as establishing open lines of communication and joint or co-operative decision-making, I now wish to be more specific as this project relates to community involvement at Saibai State School which has a school population of Torres Strait Islanders and Papuans, who identify with the Saibai population.

Whilst parental involvement is a need that I see for our school, and indigenous schools in general, it is also a need expressed by many committees which represent the ideas of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

The Aboriginal Consultative Group, in their report to the Schools Commission titled *Education for Aborigines*, made the following statement in relation to involving parents in the education of their children:

We are aware of recent research that emphasises the importance of adult and parent involvement in the educational process. This is particularly relevant in an Aboriginal context where traditionally the education of children was the responsibility of the family. We are keen to see Aboriginal parents become more active in their children's education, and in turn develop more skills and greater confidence in themselves.

(Aboriginal Consultative Group,
1975, p.13)

This report goes on to make recommendations relating to priorities in the education of Aborigines. Recommendation 8 states:

We recommend that a variety of means be examined for involving Aboriginal parents in their children's education.

(Aboriginal Consultative Group,
1975, p.13)

It must be realised that under the terms of the committee, Aboriginal refers to both Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, as this committee had Torres Strait representatives on it.

The desire for parental involvement in Aboriginal/Torres Strait schools is also stated in the 1984 First Report of the Working Party on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, when it recommends a

Parent, Community and Staff Development element to promote the professional development of staff and the more effective participation of parents and Aboriginal communities in school activities...

(Commonwealth Schools Commission and National
Aboriginal Education Committee, 1984, p.xiii)

The Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Committee has, as recently as 1985, expressed a desire to be actively involved in all levels of education in the Torres Strait. In their policy statement they state:

There is a need for educational planning in the Torres Strait Islands which has inputs from both professional institutions like the Queensland Department of Education and real local participation.

(1985, p.7)

They further list two points to emphasise their desire for active parental involvement in education:

1.0 The Aims of Torres Strait Islanders for Schooling

1.2 Torres Strait Islanders want education to be appropriate to their environment and structured to have more parental involvement.

1.4 Torres Strait Islanders want representation by people who can reflect both their needs and expectations on the Committee established for their

advancement. The participation of Torres Strait Islanders must be built into the Schooling system.

(Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Committee, 1985, pp.7-8)

Accepting then that parental involvement is not only educationally sound but also an expressed need or desire of the Torres Strait Islanders, it became the aim of our school to encourage the development of parental involvement, but at a rate that was suitable to parents and teachers.

As the first European principal to come to Saibai State School, whose perceived role was to work with Islander teachers to improve teaching skills, and with parents to improve their understandings of their expectations of the education system, I realized that it was vital for open communication to develop if the process of joint decision-making was eventually to come to fruition.

I agree with Hill, when he states that:

...principals are the key change agents in a primary school and that the enthusiasms of other teachers and of parents will be either increased or cancelled out by his reactions.

(Hill, 1985, p.7)

However, I also strongly believe that in this cross-cultural situation the principal must be prepared to proceed at a rate that is non-threatening to most of the community members. Parental involvement needs to be worked on slowly but continually and the role of parents, as involved school members, needs to be nurtured. It must be realised that this is a very new role for all parents.

Mellor (1980) states:

Involvement was not part of the parents' school experience. They remember their parents only going to school to complain if something was wrong. As children, they may have been embarrassed...The idea of parents having a real place in their child's schooling is new to them.

(Mellor, 1980, p.3)

Budby (1978) also cites two problems that have confronted those who have attempted involving parents and adults in education.

He states that there is:

- a) Reluctance of Aboriginal/Islander people to become members of committees and to approach the school [and]
- b) A lack of understanding of the educational process.

(Budby, 1978, p.50)

It was with these cautions in mind, but also with the strong belief that a school must represent the clients that it represents, that we attempted to involve parents in the education of their children at Saibai State School.

From the beginning of 1986, when I took up my appointment as the first principal at Saibai State School, after having worked at Boigu State School, about fifteen kilometres away, the teachers and community members made the following points quite clear to me:

1. They saw me as the educational leader in the school, but wanted to know more about what today's education could or should offer.
2. They wanted their children to gain a greater mastery of Standard Australian English, but not at the sacrifice of of their own culture or language, Kalaw Kawaw Ya.
3. They wanted the school to assist in the maintenance of the local culture and language but did not see that the principal should become an "expert" on the culture or the language.
4. They respected and honoured the position of the local teachers and whilst wanting "better" education for their children, did not want the importance of the Islander teachers' position eroded.
5. They were keen to assist the school in the above but were not sure how to do this and preferred to do this from the safety of their homes.
6. They wanted to participate in the decision-making (or at least some of the decision-making) of the school, but wanted to be able to communicate in Kalaw Kawaw Ya, therefore they needed to often communicate through a trusted intermediary.
7. They wanted their views, whether given in Standard Australian English or Kalaw Kawaw Ya, to be respected.

8. They wanted to up-grade the facilities offered at the school, through fund raising, where and when necessary, but did not wish this to be seen as their most important role.

The above points were not given at a school or community meeting in my first week at Saibai Island. They were gained through open discussion with the teachers, councillors, community members and the children. Much time in 1986 was spent in "walking and talking". By this I mean that I, as the principal of the school, would walk around the community either by myself or with a respected local teacher, and discuss the above. Discussions were also characterised by the use of interpreters, so that the parents could speak in Kalaw Kawaw Ya, and I could speak in Standard Australian English. Discussions were generally followed by immediate follow-up, so that parents and community members could see that their requests or opinions were being acted upon.

We endeavour through the above to create a highly effective school and community work group. Sergiovannie and Starratt (1983) state that:

A highly effective school work group is described as one that: 1) members perceive as supportive and that builds and maintains their sense of personal worth, 2) has high performance goals that are consistent with those of the school and/or the profession, 3) use group decision-making, and 4) is linked to other school groups through multiple and overlapping group structures.

(Sergiovannie and Starratt, 1983, p.63)

I believe the above quote also exemplifies what we attempted to achieve through community involvement.

Our need for community involvement in our school and the community's needs as outlined in points 1 to 8 above resulted in the following projects:

1. PARENT INFORMATION BOOKLET

As parents saw a need to have information about the operation of the school, I decided to prepare and present a parent information booklet. This was presented at a P. & C. meeting and after its presentation, discussion in "language" chaired by the president was encouraged. Parents decided that, whilst they considered the booklet to be useful, it would be more beneficial if it was also prepared in Kalaw Kawaw Ya. The outcome of this was the preparation of *Kawa Saibai Ngurpay - Apupa thathipa Yadaynga Moegina Thusi*,

which was printed and distributed in February 1987. The production of this booklet is an important aspect of community involvement as it honours the work that they have done. It is visual proof that their work and ideas are accepted. The production of this booklet was an example of what Hill (1985, p.8) refers to as "Empowerment".

2. SAIBAI ISLAND NEWS

At 'yarning' sessions and eventually at a staff meeting and P & C meeting it was mentioned that some other schools had newspapers that allowed parents to contribute ideas about school, community happenings, etc., and in which the school can keep the community informed about what is going on at school. The P & C requested that a newspaper be started and they offered to finance the project. It was agreed initially that all articles submitted would be published, but after a couple of controversial articles, the Community Council suggested that an "editorial committee" be established. The editorial committee was established and once again the community, through the Council was "empowered".

The *SAIBAI NEWS* is a joint community project. The community is responsible for contributing articles, Islander teachers collect articles, I, the principal, put the articles into Standard Australian English, and the deputy chairman edits articles written in Kalaw Kawaw Ya. The staff and students produce and distribute the newspaper.

The *SAIBAI NEWS* has become yet another medium of communication within the community, and as it is a reliable weekly publication, produced through community co-operation, it has expanded our avenues for communication.

3. SCHOOL/COMMUNITY ART AND LANGUAGE PROGRAM.

Whilst community members advocate a need for the school to offer most of its instruction in English, many people also expressed a desire for the school to support the maintenance of the local language and crafts. As I agreed with this proposal, but did not see my role to be co-ordinator of cultural maintenance, I handed over this project to two senior Islander teachers. They were given guidelines in which to work, i.e., each class was allowed a maximum of two hours school time per week to be involved in distinct cultural/language activities. The result of these teachers working out a program with community people is that all classes are timetables to undertake one, one and a half hour craft/language lesson with a community person each week. Children participate in these lessons at the people's homes, which seems to

be a satisfactory arrangement for all concerned. Whilst I must admit that at times these lessons do not progress exactly as I would hope, I believe that I must honour the arrangements made by the community members. As Hill (1985) states:

Genuine involvement implies a degree of empowerment. Wise principals must, in good conscience, decide how much of their powers they can usefully delegate, and then live with it...decisions must be honoured.

(Hill, 1985, p.8)

This is certainly not an exhaustive account of the ways in which we have attempted to encourage community involvement in our school, but rather it is a sample of what we have attempted.

As stated previously, in our cross-cultural setting, where community involvement in education is a new venture for all concerned, we are progressing at a rate that I feel is agreeable to all.

Cunningham (1985) states that:

Leading involves getting everyone to pursue a shared mission. The excitement generated by such a strategy can revitalise an organisation and create leaders at every level.

(Cunningham, 1985, p.20)

I believe that our attempts at community involvement are truly creating what Cunningham above refers to as "leaders" and that the contribution of these leaders to the general aims of our school are producing expanding community interest.

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