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Teaching and Education

Benefits of Community Involvement at the School Level

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Orientation

I would like to begin by providing a context that can be used to place my discussion about experiences at a remote school in the Northern Territory (NT) into perspective.

In the NT 53% of schools are located in remote areas and these cater for up to 23% of NT students (Combe, 2000). The NT has the highest proportion of Indigenous students enrolled in schools with 35.2% of the overall student population identifying as Indigenous Australian (Collins, 1999). The next closest state is Western Australia with an Indigenous student enrollment average of 5.1%, this is compared with a national average of 3.2%.

There is a range of remote schools throughout the NT, from one-teacher schools with an enrolment of twelve or more students, to large 'Community Education Centres (CECs)' with

several hundred students. According to the NTDE (1998: 5) there are in excess of fifty one-teacher and small schools situated on Indigenous communities and pastoral properties throughout the NT. The majority of these remote schools cater solely for Indigenous students.

The classes in a remote school are generally multi-age and ability, with an extremely high proportion of students being English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Many students are fluent in at least one Indigenous language before they enter the classroom and begin learning Standard Australian English (SAE). I did know some students who could speak three Indigenous Australian languages at the same time as learning SAE.

With this context in mind I would like to share some experiences I have been involved in within this educational environment as I worked in a two-teacher school.

I would like to examine different programs and initiatives that were adopted by teachers and community members to help guide the school

through a tough transitional phase. The shared aim was to establish a community school that was both culturally inclusive as well as educationally valuable.

Firstly, however, I will begin with the foundations of these programs and initiatives and the conceptual framework underpinning the activities. Following this I will then explore the programs and initiatives as they were developed at the school with an understanding of the underlying principles that were the motivating influences for these activities.

Conceptual Framework

Community involvement in education is integral for achieving positive outcomes for students, teachers and schools. This involvement in education is widely cited by many educational commentators as being able to provide a variety of positive contributions to a school. This concept was adopted by the school, to help create an environment that reflected cultural values and assisted the teachers to understand the context in which we were teaching.

Currently across Australia there is a growing national awareness of the significance of parental participation in education. Key national educational bodies have indicated the positive outcomes that can result from parental involvement in mainstream schools. The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) completed a review of the 'Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Programme' and found that:

When parents are active partners in their children's education, the results are improved student achievement, better school attendance, reduced dropout rates, and decreased delinquency. (DETYA, 1999: 6)

In addition DETYA highlighted the need for decision-making processes to change in order to foster increased Indigenous parental involvement in schooling. It is important here to understand the national awareness of the significance of this participation and the positive

outcomes that are seen as a result of this involvement.

Awareness of the contribution that Indigenous parents can make to their children's education is reiterated by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 1997). According to MCEETYA community involvement in the school is crucial for Indigenous Australian students in order for them to experience success at school. MCEETYA (1997: 76) completed a national report on schooling in Australia and found that the involvement of parents and the community, within Indigenous education, can assist students in three main ways:

It can increase the interest of parents in their children's education and the level of support for learning and attainment: it can enhance students' sense of belonging: and it can assist the school in providing more culturally appropriate and sensitive responses to the needs of their Indigenous students.

Collins (1999) conducted an independent review on Indigenous Education in the NT and also comments on how community involvement can positively impact student-learning outcomes and stated that '... Active parent participation in children's schooling both at the school and at home is a known characteristic of student success' (1999: 167).

As discussed by these educational bodies and commentators, parental and community involvement in education can have extensive beneficial outcomes for students and communities. This is only a brief introduction to the amount of research on community involvement and to explore this concept fully would involve a much lengthier discussion. The main objective has been to gain an understanding of the significance that this participation holds for teachers and students.



In light of the positive outcomes that have been discussed we at Epenarra School began exploring how the concept of community involvement could become a vehicle that allowed the school and wider community to foster and implement effective educational programs. Programs which could hopefully assist in student learning and develop closer understandings between the school and the community.

Program and Initiatives Fostering Community Involvement.

Initially we met with parents and discussed the 'Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness (ASSPA) program funded by the then Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). This body is now called the Department of Employment, Science and Training (DEST) and still funds the ASSPA program.

The ASSPA program '...aims to involve the parents of Indigenous students in decisions that affect their children's schooling' (DETYA, 1998: 3). The program aims to facilitate this by providing funding to the school ASSPA committee on completion of the application process at the beginning of each year. This process also requires the committee to construct a yearly plan of aims and activities as well as adhere to the rigorous monthly, half-yearly, and yearly evaluation and acquittal processes.

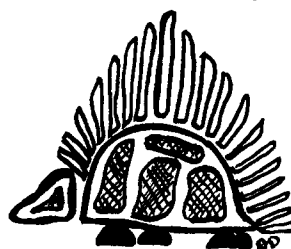
There are five main sections in the ASSPA program, with four of these directly relating to 'The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy' (AEP). They include the involvement of Indigenous Australians in educational decision-making, equality of access

to education, equity of educational participation, and equitable and appropriate educational outcomes. The fifth area covers cultural activities and excursions.

These different sections enabled the school ASSPA committee to explore programs and activities that could improve outcomes in a range of areas. An example of an activity the school ASSPA group developed each term for the three and a half years we were there relates to the construction of culturally appropriate materials for students to use in the classroom. These materials added a local perspective to the curriculum areas being explored and were eagerly developed and utilised by all students. I will attempt to summarise the program as briefly as possible.

The project involved students and community members participating in cultural excursions to significant areas in the immediate region. Appropriate community members decided upon the areas to travel to. Once there, students would then follow the directions given by the community members and complete the required activities. During this process other parents and staff took digital pictures and anecdotal notes. When the activities were completed everybody would then return to school.

Over the following weeks students, staff and community members would then deconstruct the expedition and use the digital pictures, notes and personal learning and understandings to create a text of the experience. This would then be compiled and laminated to form a book. Over the year, students, staff and parents constructed a variety of texts and books. Some of these books were written entirely in the Indigenous language, *Alywarra*, others in English and some in both languages.

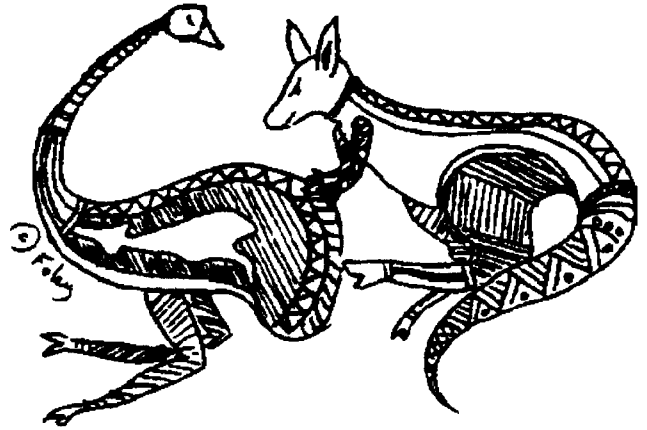


This constructed text would be used for a variety of teaching/learning activities. These activities would cover curriculum areas such as ESL, mathematics, art, health, Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), and provide a culturally inclusive and contextually based educational program.

The project required a lot of work by all who participated in the activities. Staff needed to listen and understand the experiences, as well as supporting parents in facilitating the activities in the most appropriate manner. This involved ongoing consultation and dialogue between the non-Indigenous teachers, Indigenous assistant-teachers, parents and community members. This process included negotiating and re-negotiating between everyone continually during the project to ensure shared and amicable outcomes.

The project over the three and a half years was a great success and students thoroughly enjoyed the content and learning experiences. Furthermore, the community involvement resulting from the project facilitated closer ties and understandings between the school and the students and parents.

Thus it may be seen how the ASSPA program was beneficial in a variety of ways. The type of success we experienced was also reflected in a review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance program completed by DETYA (1999). Here the links between community involvement in schools and student success was clearly stated. The ASSPA program in this review was considered as being effective in '... breaking down barriers and establishing a forum for productive dialogue between parents of Indigenous students and their educators' (DETYA, 1999: 6). Parents and community members regularly attended the ASSPA meetings and discussed a variety of issues relating to the students and the school. The program allowed parents to discuss these issues and become involved in decision-making processes.



The school ASSPA committee was invaluable in helping to create and establish community involvement at the school. Through the regular meetings parents and community members were able to discuss issues in an open forum. Parents and Indigenous staff at the school regularly translated each issue and also discussed many important matters in language. This allowed all people who attended, especially Elders in the community, to be involved in the decision-making process. This also permitted issues to be raised and explored in a manner that was appropriate for all involved. The ASSPA program also worked in conjunction with other school programs.

The basis for another program developed at the school stems from the *Health is Life* (1991) document. This resource has been promoted by the Sport, Health and Physical Education School (SHAPES) advisors and consists of a health education framework developed by health officers in conjunction with Batchelor College students completing education and health degrees.

The program involves teachers and community members sitting down together and constructing integrated units of work. These units cover all subject areas and are thematically based around the different relationships that evolve from, 'Land and the Law'. This central theme has been identified as the starting point from which all Indigenous Australian beliefs, values and customs begin. Gatjil Djerrkura (cited in *Health is Life*, 1991: 1) advocates the use of this resource

and explains the relevance of the material by stating:

To Aboriginal people, Health is Life, this means promoting health to strengthen the life of Aboriginal people as a way of ensuring their survival and growth.

There are five areas that are covered in this program and they include, family, food, shelter, community hygiene, and body and activity. A unit of work is constructed and written for each of these five areas. Each unit lasts for roughly one school term, but the unit duration also has the ability to be flexible according to the input by community members and staff. Initially, community members and teachers select desired learning outcomes from the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework and plan the appropriate assessment tasks required to monitor these outcomes. Then together teachers and community members read through the unit overview and discuss appropriate teaching and learning activities. The final task is to collate all the activities into a unit of work that integrates the learning areas.

Community members discuss the appropriate people who will be asked to be involved in presenting certain activities to the students. An example of this is when we completed a unit on food; people identified certain community members during the unit preparation process as the appropriate people to lead the students in imparting bush food knowledge. A second unit involved investigating family relationships and this meant certain community members planning and delivering this unit to students in a way that was both sensitive to the relationships that exist inside and outside the school, as well as demonstrating the inter-relatedness of the extended family in the community and beyond.

Both staff and community members evaluate the unit continually. Activities were extremely successful and the students responded positively to both the presentation and the activities that were used to explore the curriculum processes and content. Through their involvement in the

planning and delivery of these different units, not only has the level of community involvement in the school improved, but also the quality of the participation. Students thoroughly enjoyed the relevant and contextually based program content as well as the mode of delivery. The program has positive repercussions on student learning development and addresses many of the student learning behaviours that have been identified as consistent with Indigenous students.

Finally, the units of work have allowed a deeper community involvement in classroom learning to develop. This participation has contributed to a stronger link between the school and the community and is helping to create joint educational objectives that are identified as appropriate and desirable for students in this remote.

This program has facilitated community involvement in classroom learning and teachers and parents have responded positively to the resources and teaching pedagogies involved. The main difficulties of the program concern communication and the ongoing need to keep everybody informed and focused on the unit. Overall the units are successful, inclusive and continually evolving.

As discussed, the ASSPA program and SHAPES units have both helped facilitate greater community involvement in the remote school where we were teaching. These were not the only initiatives that evolved over time at the school. Each week the staff and students held a video night at school showcasing footage of work the students had been completing during the week. This was coupled with fundraising activities to save for a school playground.

Another program included regular school open days where parents attended and participated in many of the teaching/learning activities the students would complete on a daily basis. This helped to promote the great work of the staff and students and demystify the sometimes-foreign school environment.

The Cyclic Process

Amongst the other initiatives and programs running at the school, some were trailed and found to be unsuccessful for a variety of reasons, whilst others are still in place today. All school programs required a great deal of energy and understanding from those involved. From my experience at this school it is my view that there is a cyclic process of listening, negotiating, re-negotiating, acting and reflecting which is vital in helping to facilitate community involvement in the school. This process needed to be ongoing and was not taken for granted. Accepting this cyclic process for each initiative or program trialed or introduced at the school required both teamwork as well as respect for all people involved.

The benefits that result from following this form of capacity building were significant and allowed a more transparent and appropriate communication process to occur. I enjoyed working in this manner and this cyclic process allowed the school to continually move forward and meet the challenges as they arose.

Conclusion

Our time at the school began with an enrolment of 28 students and three part-time Indigenous staff. Over three and a half years, the enrolment rose to 47 students and 10 part-time Indigenous staff members. Furthermore, there was an increase in the number of parents supporting their children by attending school with them each day and assisting them in class on a voluntary basis.

Students worked extremely hard at school and were making solid progress through the levels of Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. This learning was supported by culturally inclusive materials that provided students with relevant content resources, and allowed the students to bring their existing knowledge into the classroom.

Valuing students' existing knowledge and understandings in the school also helped develop students' self-esteem. Indigenous staff at school provided great role models for students as well as facilitating a deeper communication process between the school and the community. Staff continually supported the students and helped build a positive school and learning environment.

The cyclic process of listening, negotiating, re-negotiating, acting and reflecting was integral to developing closer ties between the school and community. This process was undertaken on a continual basis and was never taken for granted.

From my experience at this and other remote schools it has become clear to me how significant and important community involvement is to the success of Indigenous education. Improved student learning outcomes, higher attendance and participation rates, higher levels of student and parent self-esteem, more relevant and culturally sensitive curriculums, and the inclusion of culturally appropriate teaching strategies are just some of the benefits of community involvement in remote Indigenous schools.

The anecdotes presented and discussed here indicate not only the value but also the need for increased community involvement in remote Indigenous education. The cyclic process of communicating discussed is a potential vehicle for facilitating community involvement. This process enables capacity building to occur between the school and community, as well as importantly providing support and respect for students, staff, parents and community members who are all equally involved in the education process.

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Suggested Further Reading

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