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# DIFFICULT DIALOGUE: CONVERSATIONS with ABORIGINAL PARENTS and CAREGIVERS

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## Abstract

Indigenous conversation and voice are increasingly heard in the research literature but there needs to be more dialogue in order for it to be a two-way conversation. This paper contributes to research that attempts to redress this situation by reporting on conversations with Aboriginal parents and caregivers of students enrolled in a public secondary school in a large New South Wales country town. The conversations were conducted over a three-year period (2005-7) by a team non-Indigenous researchers working in collaboration with Indigenous researchers. In this paper, we describe the various approaches we developed to establish conversations with Aboriginal parents and caregivers, and the various themes that emerged over the course of the study. We also assess how this type of research is located within and contributes to, the existing research literature. Finally, we discuss the importance of ongoing conversations with Aboriginal parents and caregivers, and how schools and systems can better respond to well-established policy goals of productive parent-school relationships.

## Introduction

It is well documented that Indigenous students in Australia generally attend school less, are suspended more and achieve lower outcomes than non-Indigenous students (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). In his National Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, committed his government to addressing this situation. Specifically, he set "concrete targets" to within a decade "halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes, and opportunities for Indigenous Australians" (cited in Hansard, 2008). Few would question the desire of the newly elected Labor government to make a difference for Aboriginal people, or the goodwill of much of the nation at this historic moment. The widespread positive response to the National Apology reflected an awareness, in both the political arena and the wider community, that the need for immediate practical action was urgent.

If we have learnt anything, however, about the impact of social and educational policy on Indigenous communities over the last two hundred years, it is that good intentions and a rush to action all too frequently lead to bad consequences. The Stolen Generations, for example, were removed from their families as a direct result of government policy that was implemented across Australia by officials who carried the title, "Protector of Aboriginals" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The National Apology belatedly recognised the mistreatment of the children who were taken away.

The recent Commonwealth government intervention in remote Northern Territory communities may be following a similar pattern. In June 2007, the Coalition government announced a series of drastic measures in response to a Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (2007). Initially there was bipartisan support for the intervention, despite the fact that the measures were not directly related to the specific recommendations of the Board of Inquiry. In their first recommendation, the authors of the report stressed the "critical importance of governments committing to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal community, whether these are in remote, regional or urban settings" (2007, p. 21). As various critics have pointed out, the government rejected this recommendation; the intervention was framed as a "top-down" crisis

measure. The Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, highlighted this ambiguity when he observed that the intervention “fosters a passive system of policy development and service delivery while at the same time criticising Indigenous peoples for being passive recipients of government services” (Calma, 2007).

In the light of these reflections, it is timely to consider how the concerns of non-Indigenous Australians, especially when they are translated into Government policy, lay claim to an understanding of what is good for Indigenous Australians, since these understandings have often been routinely formulated with little or no Indigenous involvement. A large-scale review of research into Indigenous education by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) emphasises “the importance of finding a means to include the Indigenous conversation and voice in the wider policy and research literature” (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 49). The authors suggest that the silencing of Indigenous voices is in part due to the difficulties associated with giving expression to rich oral traditions in written cultures, “especially one as formal as that of the scholarly academic or policy research community” (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 49). This is not to say that Indigenous voices have not been heard, but they have mainly been expressed through unpublished conference papers and policy submissions. Hence, “although the archive is known by the Indigenous community, it has not been exposed to the broader research community and does not inform policy as effectively as it could” (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 49). The reviewers go on to suggest that, “the first step, as with any other population, is to research Indigenous views of the desired education outcomes” (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 50).

We are aware that such a step may contribute to what Cowlshaw describes as the “unremitting and solicitous national discourse about Aborigines [which] is imbued with urgency and instrumentalism and replete with competing theories of cause and remedy” (2003, p. 104). When a space is made within this discourse for Aboriginal voices to be heard, they enter an already established conversation characterised by “redemptive talk, explanation, reproach, and remedy” (Cowlshaw, 2003, p. 104). Cowlshaw’s analysis is not intended to provide new insights into the problems of Aboriginal people, or new and better solutions but to “unravel some knots that are tying up our thoughts” (2003, p. 105). She illustrates “the formative power of this cultural realm in the relationship between the nation and Indigenous people” (Cowlshaw, 2003, p. 105). Further Cowlshaw writes that “this discursive field is an unstable mix of the romantic and the statistical, a surface imagery that mirrors the nation’s desires and fantasies” (2003, p. 104).

We undertook this research aware that we were inviting Aboriginal parents and caregivers into a conversation that was already taking place largely in their absence. We were asking them to engage with us on our terms. Nakata describes these kinds of conversations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people in universities as “difficult dialogue” (2004, p. 2). They are no less difficult in schools because the parents and caregivers can also be “easily dismissed and continually recast to the margins” (Nakata, 2004, p. 2). Yet, with great patience and hopeful resolve, most parents and caregivers were willing to take this risk, and engage in difficult dialogue with us. In the next section, we discuss how the team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and school-based personnel worked together to build bridges between the culture of home, school and educational research.

### ■ Prior research

The importance of productive parent-school relationships has been acknowledged within mainstream schooling since the creation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy in 1989. Before this recognition in policy, the complementarity of home and school in fostering the academic progress of Aboriginal children, and the rights of parents in relation to the education of their children was a topic of research. For example, during 1972-73, Watts and Henry (1978) conducted an action research project with the goal of determining whether a white parent educator could effectively develop a home-based parent education program with a focus on the mother/child system, and whether the program could be extended to include Aboriginal mothers as educators. The purpose of the program was to change the parents’ own experiences of education, its meaning and relationship to their lives, so that they could make home conditions more likely to sustain their child’s educational effort.

A more recent study was conducted by Hanrahan (2004) into a two-year home-based education program that engaged parents in educational activities with their children outside the constraints of the school. The parents’ learning program in Napranum, North Queensland provided practical structured support and concrete fun activities to engage children and parents in Western literacy and numeracy experiences in their own environment. A process evaluation of the program concluded that it unlocked some of the mysteries of schooling for parents and children, and contributed towards building bridges for children between the culture of home and the culture of school.

For some time, research has shown that Indigenous parents are unlikely to be involved in school activities and decision-making (Eckerman, 1994), they have little input to the curriculum development (Herbert

et al., 1999), and they are likely to experience talking to teachers as problematic (Ngarritjan-Kessariss, 1994). Numerous policies and reports continue to reiterate the role of Indigenous parents as the first educators of their children (MCEETYA, 1999) and the Vinson Inquiry (Esson et al., 2002) stressed the importance of the principal, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), and successful teachers in supporting the participation and success of Aboriginal students in mainstream schooling. In relation to the role of the principal, the Inquiry concluded that the principal must be committed to implementing the Aboriginal Education policy, and accountable to the parents of the Aboriginal students who attend the school. Esson et al. write that "this implies an ongoing, informal relationship with both Aboriginal students and their parents, and a willingness to engage with them on their own territory" (2002, p. 22).

The ACER review mentioned earlier (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004) concludes that research needs to unpack the reasons for Indigenous peoples' lack of involvement in schools and how it can be fostered. In general, the amount and type of parental participation in schooling is highly dependent upon a number of school related characteristics including the degree to which parental participation is valued by school leaders and teachers, the nature of the demands made upon parents, as well as the degree to which the wide ranging responsibilities of parents and the resources available to them are taken into consideration.

It is well established that the ability of parents to respond to these demands is linked to social class (Connell et al., 1982). American sociologist, Annette Lareau, has made a sustained contribution to examining why class differences in parent-school relations persist (1989, 2003; Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999), and claims that race acts to mediate the importance of class and that it has an independent theoretical significance in shaping family-school relations (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999, p. 38);

Many black parents, given the historical legacy of racial discrimination in schools, cannot presume or trust that their children will be treated fairly in school. Yet, they encounter rules of the game in which educators define desirable family-school relationships as based on trust, partnership, cooperation, and deference. These rules are more difficult for black than white parents to comply with. Furthermore, although race has an independent role, class also makes a difference. Thus, middle-class black parents have access to important forms of cultural capital, just as middle-class white parents do (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999, p. 42).

There are many parallels between Lareau's findings and related work in Australia. For example, Allard and

Sanderson (2003) conducted a consultation process with Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal students, teachers and representatives of the various agencies operating in a remote community in South Australia in 2001. The consultation was part of a community-based education project intended to improve the literacy, numeracy or technological skills of non-attending adolescent students. What emerged from the consultation process was that the ideal of "school as community" was problematic for Aboriginal families. When parents were invited to become involved in the school, it was on the school's terms: to support existing structures and program; to support decisions in which they had not been involved in making; and to support a school system that was largely assimilationist. The authors concluded that Aboriginal parents involved in these processes were likely to again feel dispossessed and powerless.

Groome (1990) conducted a series of unstructured interviews with 35 Nunga Aboriginal parents living in Adelaide to determine their perceptions regarding the education of their children in state schools. The voluntary participants had held high aspirations for their children and strongly believed in the importance of education which they demonstrated through active involvement in local schools. However, they believed that their children suffered a high level of personal trauma as a result of the schools failure to recognise their cultural and emotional needs, and through the effects of prejudice experienced from both staff and students.

Ngarritjan-Kessariss (1997) compared two parent based school meetings: an all white-Australian school council meeting, and an all Indigenous Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) meeting. The ethnographic study, using video analysis, was undertaken in a Darwin secondary school. The findings questioned the legitimacy of Western meetings in the Indigenous community as the main way of advancing Indigenous aspirations and resolving Indigenous problems, and warned against the silent disempowerment that unquestioned participation in white government structures, in this case, school meetings, may bring about.

Heslop (1998) investigated the interest of Aboriginal parents living in the remote Warakurna community to enter into partnership with the non-Aboriginal-dominated school that would allow local aspirations and values to be expressed in school processes. The main finding of the research was that, once they were given the opportunity, members of the Warakurna community showed a desire to be more fully involved in decision-making roles within the community.

This overview of prior research indicates that the relationship between Aboriginal parents/caregivers and schools is an interface that is frequently contested and always under construction; it is generally controlled by schools, and potentially hazardous for both Aboriginal



parents/caregivers and their children. Despite this, our experiences suggest that Aboriginal parents and caregivers are hopeful that change is possible and willing to play a part in constructing more sure-footed foundations upon which to build parent-school relationships that support their children to participate and achieve at school.

### ■ Listening to parents

In the period 2005-7, we conducted a series of consultations with Aboriginal parents and caregivers whose children attend the public secondary school in a large rural town in New South Wales. The Aboriginal support staff (Aboriginal Education Assistants and Aboriginal Education Workers) that work in the school also participated in some of the consultations. In the course of these consultations, the Aboriginal parents and support staff voiced a number of concerns about the education of their children, and the relationship between the school and the Aboriginal community in the town. Our purpose in this section is to describe the setting and how we went about the consultations.

The town has a population in excess of 15,000 people of which approximately 17% are Indigenous. Located a day's drive from the State's capital city, the town's agricultural base is supported by the surrounding fertile plains. The research was conducted on the junior campus of the secondary college. Around the mid-way point in the study, 214 students were enrolled at this campus. In some year groups, Aboriginal students accounted for over 60% of enrolments. All of the teachers and school leaders were non-Indigenous, and there were a number of Indigenous support staff employed as Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) or Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs).

Over the course of the study, the research team conducted classroom observations as well as interviews with school leaders, teachers, parents and caregivers. Elsewhere, we have described the default practices of schooling that were embedded within the school, and the standard classroom scripts that were characterised by high levels of teacher control and low levels of student engagement in learning (Johnston & Hayes, 2008). The numbers of Aboriginal students in the high school provided us with an opportunity to examine the tension between the teachers' efforts to engage students in learning, and the apparent refusal of many Aboriginal students to cooperate. As a result, the most disruptive students were suspended in relatively high numbers and those who remained often appeared bored, disengaged, and aimless.

While the project was primarily focused on within-school processes, such as classroom practice, leadership and professional learning, we recognised the likely influence of the school's external relations on their capacity to improve the learning outcomes

of students and teachers. This position is supported by the Aboriginal Education Policy (New South Wales Department of School Education, 2002) which states that "the participation of Aboriginal communities as equal partners ... will be essential to achieving equitable outcomes for Aboriginal students". Hence, we assumed that the nature of parent-school relations would help us to assess the school's capacity to support the learning of Aboriginal students.

Extended contact over a number of years allowed the research team to be flexible in its approach and to develop data collection methods that took account of local contexts (Hayes et al., 2009). Following a preliminary discussion with the Aboriginal support staff about an appropriate way to meet and discuss issues with the parents, the research team decided on the following approach. Wherever possible, an Aboriginal researcher would organise and facilitate the meetings with parents and caregivers. Although not from the local area, the Aboriginal researcher's extended contacts and cultural understanding would facilitate our access to parents and caregivers. The parents' views about the school, and their children's learning, would be accessed by means of a free-flowing conversational interview (Power, 2004). Such an approach is not only a familiar form of communication for the participants, but it also allows them to respond in their own words and raise issues that are important. With the agreement of the participants, the conversations would be taped for later analysis by the research team. The research team also undertook to feed back the results of the analysis to the parents who participated in the consultations.

There were three phases in the consultation. The first was mediated by the AEAs employed by the school, and by Kristal Morris, an Aboriginal researcher, working on the project. In 2005, Kristal, with the help of the AEAs, set up a meeting with the parents and caregivers of Aboriginal students of two Year 7 classes that we were focussing on in other parts of the study. Ten out of a total of 17 Aboriginal parents and caregivers attended this first meeting.

Despite the success of this meeting we were unable to attract the same level of interest from parents in subsequent visits, and this forced us to develop different approaches to making contact with Aboriginal parents and caregivers. In the middle of 2006, Kerith Power who had previously conducted research in Aboriginal education, and Dianne Roberts, an Aboriginal elder and educator from a different town, assumed responsibility for the work with Aboriginal parents. Dianne regularly attended the monthly community market with signage, informed consent materials and a tape recorder in the hope that parents and students would stop to have an informal "yarn" about the school and its improvement program. On the initial market visit two parents with different viewpoints joined in a long conversation while on

subsequent visits the Aboriginal researcher was invited to people's homes where she was able to listen freely to parents, children and Aboriginal support staff voice their perspectives on the school. Some conversations were audio taped while others were documented as anecdotal records.

The final phase was designed as a feedback session, where we could reflect back to the parents the results of our earlier consultations. In 2007, the research team distributed flyers around the town inviting Aboriginal parents and caregivers to attend a meeting at which we would provide this feedback. The Aboriginal support staff also used their networks to inform members of the local community, and we booked a room at the local TAFE. Eleven Aboriginal people attended: four were Aboriginal workers in the school and the remainder were parents, caregivers or concerned members of the local Aboriginal community. During this 90 minute meeting, a wide range of issues were discussed. While this final phase provided an opportunity for the researchers to give feedback, it also provided an opportunity for the Aboriginal parents and support staff to articulate continuing, new and urgent concerns about their children and schooling in the town which we discuss below in terms of a series of crucial connections and disconnections between the parents, their children and the school.

#### ■ Home and school: Bridging the gap

A particularly sensitive form of cultural disconnection was played out each morning around the administrative office on each of the school campuses. Many of the Aboriginal parents felt uncomfortable and embarrassed in talking to strangers through the glass office window. The office staff sometimes ignored their presence, and they recounted times where they were spoken to rudely. They described incidents where students who needed to phone home, refused to go the office to make the call but went instead to the Cultural Centre to ask the AEA's to make the call.

It was not only the physical place that was intimidating. Several parents urged the principal and teachers to talk to them in everyday language. "Why don't they speak the normal words like we know, instead of the big words where you can't understand what they're talking about?" said one parent. At the same time, parents were aware of the need for their children to learn formal English.

I would have hoped that all the teachers would be able to accept broken English [and] say's that the way we talk at home...or if we're writing a business letter we are able to use this different sort of [language] – just explain it like that. It's not right or wrong, it's just that we use, well we all do, we speak differently at home or at work or at the doctor or at court ... And it takes

a long time ... understanding up, they're not going to get it ... if we started at three and just teaching the differences from that time and then they'd be right when they're hitting high school, wouldn't they.

Parents spoke of a communication gap between the school and home. They had to rely upon their children and the community grapevine to find out information about what was happening at the school. Consequently, they missed out on hearing about parent-teacher nights; they were unable to find answers to why students did not appear to have homework, or why their workbooks contained a lot of incomplete work; they did not have the opportunity to have it explained to them why the school was streaming students, or to express their concerns about other structural changes in the school; and they did not know how their children were going at school, or how they could become involved.

I don't get to go to a lot of things. Like my daughter will tell me at the last minute. And cause I know the school sends notes home but if I don't check her port, which I don't do cause she's a teenager, I don't know. And then when I do see the notes, like I said, it's too late. Put it on the radio ... I suppose the paper's a good thing to put things in but other than that the only thing I can think is if they could do a quick call just to parents now and again, let them know there's something coming up that they really want them to attend.

This disconnection was particularly apparent when parents and caregivers talked about homework assignments. Teachers set assignments that had to be completed by the students by a particular date. Some parents indicated that they did not know what the assignments were, or when they were due. In the middle were the students who were blamed by the teachers for not completing the work, and by their parents for not telling them about the requirements so that they could remind them and support them to complete the task: "Why can there not be a more direct way to inform the parents about the assignments that does not depend upon the student to carry the information home?" said one parent. Another suggested that regular newsletters containing information about assignments be posted home.

#### ■ Teachers and learning

It was not only formal or official information between the school and the parents that was blocked or miscommunicated. Parental views of teachers were largely formed by the information or judgements they received via their children. Their insights or information about

particular teachers was derived from listening to their children's narratives of fairness/unfairness or competency/incompetency. Home-school relations operated within a field of judgemental discourse: from time to time, teachers approached parents to discuss the bad behaviour of their children; at other times, children complained to their parents about the unfairness of their teachers; and the assumptions made by teachers about the poor attitudes of Aboriginal parents towards schooling were deeply entrenched within the lexicon of teaching.

Another form of disconnection worked to turn Aboriginal students off learning. A mother described her daughter who was turned off English because her teacher "just walks in, writes on the board, turns around and says, do this". "She's too stiff", the girl told her mother, "I can't get into her". Teaching "straight out of the textbook" was not the way to connect their children to learning. The parents want teachers to establish a personal connection with their children, to engage their individual interests, and take into account the "social issues" that shape their responsiveness to learning.

One parent described her son's lack of engagement with learning. He did not like going to school, and he did not get on with many of the teachers. He was often bored with the work and he got into trouble from time to time. At times of confrontation he simply walked out of the class and school. To attach her son to learning, she argued, the teachers needed to change their methods and try to understand how Aboriginal children like her son think and behave:

Instead of sitting at desks in classrooms all day, they should have more activities outside. How can our kids learn in an environment in which they are unhappy and with teachers that they do not get on with? Aboriginal students have to see the teacher as their friend.

Connecting was not only a relationship issue; it was also a question of knowledge and curriculum. Teachers, said one parent, needed to "try something different" to engage the at-risk students and build up their confidence in learning. It was too late, said another parent, waiting until the senior years of high school to offer vocational programs. Disengagement began early with Aboriginal students and few persisted with formal learning beyond Year 10. Why not begin, she suggested, with a well-resourced vocational and work experience program for at-risk students in Years 7 and 8.

The parents were aware that the connection between their children and schooling was fragile, and could be easily broken. One parent told of her fear that her children might "give up" on school if a teacher took a dislike to them. Others spoke of not wanting to shame or embarrass their children by going to the

school. They expressed a frustration with on the one hand wanting to be supportive and on the other, not wanting to make things worse. They acknowledged that some of their children need to be "disciplined up" but they felt pulled in different directions, and were aware that this might send the wrong signal to teachers:

We were getting letters home about her behaviour ... I wasn't really heavily involved, I was sort of letting her have that bit of space and letting her hopefully settle down ... I know probably a lot of teachers, if you're not involved, teachers think oh, you don't care. And because I sort of stepped back and tried to let her settle down, well, now they know I'm pushing her and helping her along the way.

The Aboriginal workers expressed the concern that they felt the students' behaviour was deteriorating, and that the students were afraid to excel in learning because it was considered a big shame amongst their peers to be good at anything, and a stepping away from their families by being "flash".

Connecting with the life-world of the students was all the more difficult when teachers were young, inexperienced, constantly on the move, and when their motivation for teaching at the school was to build up points so that they could transfer back to the coast. Even "good" teachers, who put down roots in the community and wanted to stay, often moved on because they were not successful in gaining permanency or promotion. The constant movement involved teachers, teacher leaders, principals and school education directors – it went across the whole system. While this pattern was an outcome of systemic institutional practices, the parents saw the constant staff mobility as a source of "inconsistency" and "unpredictability" that disrupted the learning of their children.

## ■ Suspension

The issue of suspension continued to surface as a major concern throughout the three years of the study. The suspension system was based on rewards and punishments. Each student commenced at the entry Level 0 and then received commendations and certificates for acceptable behaviour, or increasing loss of "privileges" and isolation for unacceptable behaviour. At Level 1, it was recommended that the head teacher of the relevant faculty phone home to speak with a parent or caregiver. At Level 2, it was recommended that students lose their rights to represent the school, participate in the SRC and attend socials. At Level 3, it was recommended that a parent interview be requested. And, at Level 4 it was recommended that students lose all privileges, and be isolated during breaks. Suspension followed Level 4.



The frequency of suspension of Aboriginal students was a matter of great concern to parents and caregivers. The Principal and teachers may well expect the parents to join forces with the school to bring pressure on the students to become more compliant or change the behaviour that earned them a suspension. But in our conversations, it was not unusual for parents and caregivers to side with their son or daughter against the school. One mother, for example, supported her son because she felt that he had been unfairly suspended from school. In this case, the suspended student and the teacher did not agree about the meaning of the behaviour in question. The student regarded it as "mucking about"; the teacher judged the act to be "fighting" and therefore violent. At the same time, parents also recognised the difficulties some teachers faced managing the children's challenging behaviours.

My granddaughter's just had twenty days off, and first term she was suspended too. She's had so many days off. I reckon the kids are not getting the education that they need. And they send them home ... on a suspension for so many days and I don't think that's right ... I think half the time it is the children, some of the children are at fault too ... It's not the teachers so much. Like I've been up there and I seen children, when teachers talk nice to them, they just go swear, swear, swear at the teacher.

Many parents expressed concern about the length and number of suspensions handed out to Aboriginal students. This issue was raised consistently across the three years of the study. It was felt that taking kids out of school put them at risk of being in trouble or danger in the community, and that it was difficult to get them back into the routine of school. Parents and caregivers suspected that teachers and students used the system to relieve tension – teachers no longer having to struggle with reluctant learners in their class, and students no longer having to be in a situation from which they felt disengaged.

There was an additional complexity about the suspension system: some parents fear that repeated suspensions of their child would bring the welfare agency through the door. This deeply ingrained fear reflects the not too distant history of race relations in Australia in which children were still being removed from their families in New South Wales until the late 1960s. Many parents and caregivers suggested ideas for alternatives to suspension. One believed that the students should be given work to do at home. Another said that misbehaving students should be excluded from their normal class and given work to do in a special classroom.

I did have a boy [there] but he doesn't attend now, he's at home ... could still be at school if it

wasn't for the school system itself ... I think that they shouldn't be suspended, that they should be put into a different classroom. Like still stay at school, because that's what they want to be, is suspended, so they can walk around the streets.

An AEA expressed the most productive alternative to the current system which for many Aboriginal students operates as an escalator onto the streets and away from productive learning. The best way, he argued, to deal with the issues – issues which are always more than simply behavioural, and which inevitably go beyond the specific infringement that triggered the particular behavioural event – is to have a round-table discussion with teachers, AEAs, parents and student to work out an agreed strategy. The underlying issue here is how to develop an intervention system that punishes the student for misbehaviour while also providing an opportunity for restitution and reintegration into the school community.

### ■ The Cultural Centre

A parent talked about how difficult it was to know "what is hurting your kids and how to talk to your kids". She made this comment after describing how a young apparently normal Aboriginal boy hung himself. Kids, she said, need somebody other than their parents to talk to, somebody they will take notice of. Why not have counselling lessons for small groups of students at school, she suggested, where the students could talk about their problems and what is going on in their lives. Instead of keeping worries "bottled up" they could share their problems and support one another. She thought the relaxing ambience of the cultural centre would be a good place for these group discussions.

The Aboriginal support workers were attuned to the language and insecurities of indigenous learners to a degree not easily achieved by non-Aboriginal teachers. An AEA at the meeting described this close cultural connection in the following scene. The students were sitting at desks with pencils and paper completing the English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) basic skills test. One student, seeking assistance, raised her hand and looked around, trying to catch the eye of the AEA. Before the AEA could respond, the teacher noticed the student's hand in the air and walked in her direction. The student quickly lowered her hand, saying, "It's okay, Miss, It's alright". As soon as the teacher turned her back, the student looked around for the AEA and raises her hand again and the AEA made his way to the student to offer assistance. "We are not helping them answer the question", he explained, "we are just reading the question the way that they feel they can understand". The Cultural Centre on the junior school campus was a culturally comfortable zone both for Aboriginal students and parents. An AEA described how students "respectfully



interact” with the AEA; “in the best of all possible worlds”, she commented, “that’s what classrooms should be like”.

Aside from interaction in the classroom, the Aboriginal support staff were also a source of vital information for teachers about underlying tensions and conflicts, often from outside the school, which influenced the students’ behaviour. The parents lamented the fact that, in light of this valuable contribution to their children’s learning, the AEAs spend an inordinate amount of their time in the Principal’s and Deputy’s office dealing with behavioural issues and processing suspensions. The Aboriginal support staff should be involved in all the major professional decisions concerning the learning and careers of the students. The parents were concerned with the separation between the Aboriginal staff and the work of the Cultural Centre, and the mainstream academic business on the two school campuses. “The majority of the time, it’s us and them, it’s always the black side of it”, said one AEA in commenting on the waste of a valuable resource.

#### ■ A growing cultural divide

Parents were very concerned about the growing social and racial separation between the junior and senior high school. They pointed out that the staff on each campus stuck together, and that staff on the senior campus did not attend the functions on the junior campus to celebrate national Indigenous day. They also described the growing cultural divide between the two campuses and the difficulties their children experienced as they made their transition from the junior to the senior campus of the school. The parents were very aware of the demographic separation of white and black families. The junior school has become increasingly a “black” school, and white families enrol their children in Catholic or Protestant Christian schools rather than have them “cross the bridge” to attend the junior high school. Many of these children will subsequently come back to the public system at Year 11 when they enrol in the senior high school to access the superior resources provided within the public system. By this stage, the high level of suspensions and early leaving among the Indigenous students means that they enter a predominantly “white” cohort for the remainder of their schooling.

#### ■ Responding to the parents’ concerns

Despite the edge of frustration and anger in some of the comments and observations of the Aboriginal parents and education workers, in general they remained hopeful that schooling would contribute to a better future for their children. This ambivalent mix of frustration and hope was well expressed by one mother as follows:

Aboriginal people have got history with education, with the schools, with police, with the welfare system over many generations. That is handed down from generation to generation. You know, the hurt, the anger, the disappointment over the years and we understand that. But in order for our people to learn more about the education system and the welfare system they’ve got to be a part of it. They’ve got to go to meetings, especially go to the schools; they’ve got to be involved in their kids’ learning. [We need to] get off our butts and do that. And we need to stop saying, okay, I’m not going to school ‘cause I never went to school, I’m not going, ‘cause I know how the teacher thinks of me. And they still say it today. My own family, own brothers and sisters would say that ... but chuck that away and start thinking about the kids and their grandchildren.

This parent describes why communication between teachers and Aboriginal parents and caregivers can be so difficult. It is not just about the present but also the past and, ultimately, the future. Despite these difficulties, many parents and caregivers accept what the mother acknowledges above – “they’ve got to be involved in their kids’ learning”. Our research confirms that the amount and type of parental participation in schooling is highly dependent upon school related factors, even so the parents and caregivers that we spoke with were not only hopeful that change is possible, but also willing to play a part in constructing a more productive and collaborative relationship with the school. More than this, they outlined a number of good ideas for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and demonstrated a realistic understanding of the difficulties and challenges faced by the teachers of their children.

Schools can play a part in making conversations with Aboriginal parents and caregivers less difficult. Many of the problems raised are not unique to the school, and might be addressed by some relatively straightforward solutions. For example, some modifications to the physical environment of the front office may make it more welcoming for parents. Cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous workers and the appointment of Aboriginal staff might also help to ensure that Aboriginal parents and students are treated in a culturally sensitive manner. Other practical solutions that were suggested by the participants include a regular newsletter posted to parents containing information about future events, due dates for major assignments, and information about school procedures; a visit by the Year Adviser, at the beginning and end of each school year, to the homes of parents who have not attended the formal parent-teacher evenings to discuss the progress of the student, and have an informal and friendly conversation about

any issues that concern the teachers, the student and the parents; and regular, informal gatherings such as barbeques where teachers and parents can meet and talk in a relaxed, non-threatening setting.

Parents and caregivers are potentially part of the solution to improving the educational outcomes from schooling of Indigenous young people. There is no question that communication is necessary between parents and teachers but it may be difficult dialogue. Understanding the nature of these difficulties, especially their historical, cultural and institutional contexts may help to explain the risks that parents and caregivers take in entering these conversations, and the role of school-based personnel in keeping open the lines of communication. Conversation is by nature two-way and in order to improve the educational opportunities for young Indigenous Australians, their parents and caregivers must not only be heard, they must be listened to.

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