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Section C: Schools

The Empowerment of Indigenous Australians in Mainstream Education

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Introduction

The purpose of this project is to implement strategies that will empower Indigenous Australians in mainstream education; specifically, at Chatswood Hills State School, Springwood. The proposed plan will continue to be implemented over a three-year period with on-going development expected beyond that time. My primary role will be as facilitator in initiating appropriate strategies. As a permanent teacher on the staff of the school, I will also participate in some or all of the programs, as requested.

Background

1. Rationale

Within a social and historical context, the policies of the State of Queensland have often failed to supply Indigenous students with an appropriate and adequate education to ensure they have fulfilling futures. In areas of policy where, in my opinion, the State government often continues to neglect its obligations, Indigenous Australians may need to take action in identifying and securing educational rights. The opportunities for this to take place within the school system have been limited and need to be improved with the combined effort and cooperation of all stake-holders.

2. Plan Proposal

At Chatswood Hills State School, the implementation of a three-year plan proposes to combine all options available to empower the Indigenous families within its community (Figure 1.).

The next segment will examine in detail the theoretical basis for the first two phases of the plan; the formation of an ASSPA Committee and cultural awareness training for school staff.

3. Theoretical Framework

"Race is a phenomenon which one only begins to understand when one sees it working within different institutions, processes and practices of whole societies, in their full complexity." (Hall 1981:59).

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders in mainstream education are in a position to bear witness to manifestations of racialism but the question arises as to whom has the power and authority to influence the status-quo to ensure equity for all concerned.

A belief shared by many Indigenous Australians, as reflected in various surveys over recent years (e.g. McInerney 1989, 1992, O'Shane and Bickford 1991) is echoed in the words of Huggins (1999 radio interview), who said that education is "..the tool for the future...the ticket to the outside world... through education comes knowledge and through knowledge comes power ". As identified in those surveys, Indigenous parents were perceived to be the major group influencing children's education.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

* Programs
* Funding
* Curriculum
* Positive relationships
* Policy documents
* Facilitators (including
  Indigenous teacher
  aides and other
  community support)

PARENT /

COMMUNITY

PARTICIPATION
&
DECISION-
MAKING

TWO-WAY

CULTURAL
AWARENESS &
PARTNERSHIP –
BUILDING

* ASSPA Committee

* P & C Association
* School Council

* Mentors
* ATSI liaison
  officers
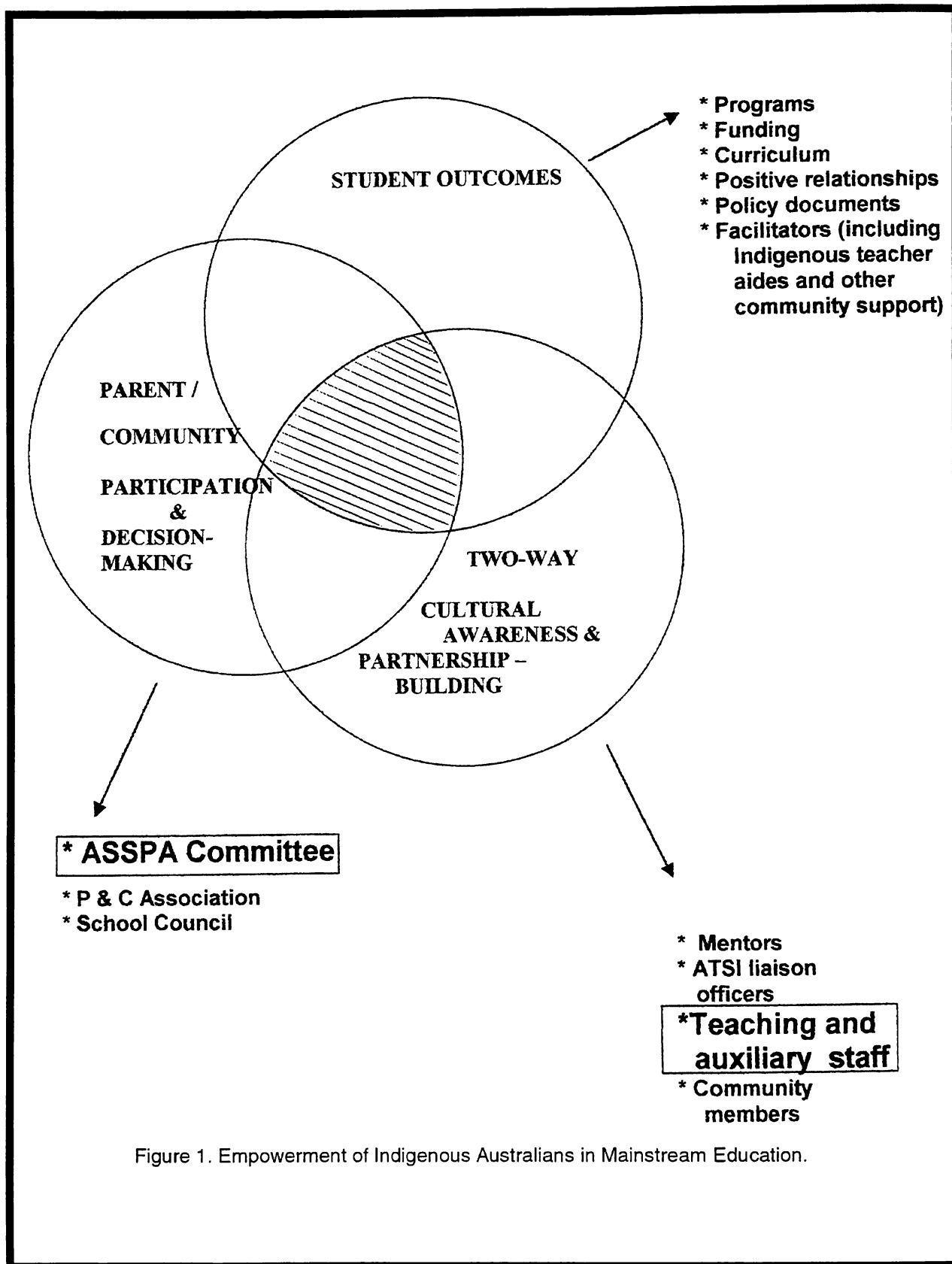
*Teaching and
auxiliary staff

* Community
  members

Figure 1. Empowerment of Indigenous Australians in Mainstream Education.

On this basis, the empowerment of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, as a key influence on student outcomes within the Chatswood Hills State School community, has been chosen as the thread linking all aspects of a three-year action plan (Figure 1.). The aim of this plan is to develop and implement a pro-active strategy within the school community to ensure positive outcomes for all concerned. It is anticipated that after the initial three-year period there would be a continued commitment to this dynamic process as an established facet of the school-based management structure.

The ability of mainstream education to cater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students hinges on whether the Indigenous community perceives the education system is attending to, or even conscious of, their interests and goals. Historically, official Australian attitudes to Indigenous education passed through paternalistic and assimilatist phases which attempted to eliminate Indigenous spiritual, cultural and linguistic traits (O'Shane and Bickford 1991:1).

However, since the 1967 Referendum when the position of Indigenous people changed from one of exclusion from to one of inclusion within the Australian Constitution, there has been a general desire to integrate into White society with accompanying civil rights as well as the right to cultural identity. The current era of ideological and economic expediency (interpreted by some as a moral imperative) ensures that the main aim at present is to mainstream Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students but has the education system acknowledged an accompanying right to Indigenous decision-making?

Considering that parents and teachers are the two main adult influences on students, positive outcomes will come from the parents' abilities to have some say in the education system and teachers' abilities to provide an appropriate curriculum and learning environment. It is therefore these two groups that need to be targeted if education is be a worthwhile experience for Indigenous people. Each has a certain responsibility to participate according to their duty of care: parents, especially where structures such as the ASSPA Program exist, and teachers, as the Education Queensland (1998) Code of Conduct stipulates.

Whether through historical mistrust or a heightened cultural and educational awareness, Indigenous parents may perceive schools as generally negative and threatening places (Groome 1995:50). Their attitudes may include:

- Anger over the stereotyping that they and their children face
- Concern about not being treated with respect
- A lack of confidence and skills in dealing with teachers
- Frustration over being viewed by teachers as having nothing to offer
- Being embarrassed about only meeting a teacher over a crisis
- Frustrated about the lack of opportunities to become involved
- Not trusting or understanding the school and its staff
- Believing that in school their cultural background is being denigrated and their identity destroyed.

Whether these perceptions are true of all schools or not, parents may make inaccurate assumptions about their particular school and the achievement of their children (Groome 1995:51). Such perceptions may perpetuate what Valadian (1991:9) terms as a 'victim philosophy' of debilitating attitudes, resulting from accumulated ill treatment of Indigenous people in education.

Dodson (1994:13) is concerned that the values being transmitted in the education system are not of the dignity of Indigenous peoples and knowledges but rather their invisibility and so-called 'disadvantage'. Parents who are well educated can be especially frustrated with these issues and find their relationship with the school is an extension of their general feeling of powerlessness in dealing with White society. Sometimes resentment can also arise where parents, through their belief in the need to participate, feel forced to enter a hostile education system. The school environment, being representative of mainstream institutions, is often then a perpetrator and sustainer of stereotyping that becomes entrenched as institutionalised racism (Groome 1995:76). The school may generalise about Indigenous parents on the basis of biased opinions about their membership

of a particular group, socio-economic background, racial background, occupation, gender, level of education, children's aspirations and their oppressed position in Australian society (O'Shane and Bickford 1991:32). The development of 'racist culture' had its origins in Europe, beginning in the sixteenth century with the significant changes in philosophical beliefs concerning man's place in the universe (Goldberg 1993:5). Marginalisation of groups by 'difference' became a means of control through the power of supremacy, both in an ideological sense and the reality of a majority ruling. Indigenous people in colonial Australia had this Western concept forced upon them from the time of settlement.

Today, the feeling of powerlessness becomes accentuated with the parents' awareness that they also have limited access to the culture of power that makes and remakes the societal system in its own image (Keeffe 1992:3). The introduction of a Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) Committee into a school structure therefore becomes a means of access to that broader system through the education process; one that has been given recognised, although sometimes limited, power to determine the direction of change in education policy[1].

The ASSPA Program is one of several Commonwealth initiatives in accordance with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy of 1989 (Commonwealth of Australia 1989). The empowerment of Indigenous people in education is further endorsed within the *National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996 – 2002* which has a long-term vision for the importance of self-determination (DEETYA 1995).

The objectives of the ASSPA Program reflect the goals set out in the two documents just mentioned. They are described as:

*   encouraging greater Indigenous parent involvement in schools,
*   encouraging Indigenous parents to participate in decision making in the school so that they can influence the development of the school curriculum to meet the needs of Indigenous students,
*   encouraging schools to create a more supportive and welcoming environment for Indigenous students and their parents,
*   making parents more aware of what is happening in the school and how it teaches Indigenous students, and
*   encouraging the participation of Indigenous children in preschool programs (Commonwealth of Australia 1998:3).

Indigenous parents can benefit from the inclusion of this program in school management if it develops their confidence to approach established internal structures. The program provides the opportunity to become involved in decision-making and participation, by developing understanding and a supportive environment, and by evaluating the cultural appropriateness of resources being used in the school.

Figure 2. Pryor images of Aboriginal scepticism (Broome 1994:238).

The scope of the first phase of the three-year plan at Chatswood Hills does not look beyond the immediate school community at this stage. However, through parent involvement in the ASSPA Committee, awareness can be raised as to the possibility of further involvement on broader issues of educational and community needs. Government organisations such as the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Committee (QATSIECC) provide the opportunity for community consultation through peak community advisory bodies endorsed in the Ministerial Advisory Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education (MACATSIE) 1996 Review (Riddiford 1997:1).

The effectiveness of such bodies may be arguable on the basis of the degree that participants' contributions are seriously considered or acted upon. Follow-up investigation into the outcomes of the involvement of Indigenous contributors would be beneficial in monitoring just how effective consultation really is. Placed in an historical context, Indigenous people continue to be distrustful of policies that govern their lives, ones that persist in excluding their right to the decision-making process.

Consultation has been a practice considered indicative of self-determination but which now many believe is merely an attempt to appease discontent. Alternatively, many also see consultation as a necessary tool in placing Indigenous people where policies are being decided (Huggins 1999 pers.com.). Ideally, the involvement of Indigenous parents at school level provides an opportunity for teachers and parents to be equal partners in educating children. It is the responsibility of all stake-holders, through the process of consultation, to ensure that opportunity is available.

'Educational disadvantage' according to Fitzgerald (1976:5) is defined as "...the unfavourable condition of those social groups and individuals who derive least benefit from education services". However, Cook (1995:89) explained that Fitzgerald was not defining 'disadvantaged' as associated with a low capacity to take advantage of facilities. Rather Fitzgerald (1976:67) links it instead to 'cultural disadvantage' and the failure of schools to recognise and accept people's different values and experiences. The

attitudes of teachers, whether defined as racist or merely ignorant, and who are the major influence on students, become highly significant within this paradigm. Central to the orthodox attitude set is a denial of any social or economic disadvantage in urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia (Keeffe 1992:67). The survey of Indigenous parents by McInerny (1989) gave an indication of the different ways of thinking about education between two cultures. He noted some similar expectations but also many varying aspirations. If the gap is to be broached then some serious effort must be made to build meaningful relationships between stake-holders.

In conversations conducted in the survey of O'Shane and Bickford (1991:32), some Indigenous parents did not wish to be too harsh about the ignorance of teachers because they felt most have never had the opportunity to gain an understanding of Indigenous peoples. Can this be accepted, though, as an excuse on ethical grounds when teachers have a professional obligation of "duty of care" (Education Queensland 1998:12) to every student under their supervision? Malin (1990:312) defines the role of the teacher as "an equitable distributor of a number of resources...time, affection, responsibility, encouragement and high expectations". Can teachers be equitable when their attitudes towards Indigenous students as a group vary? Groome (1995:iii) considers that the educational prospects of Indigenous students could be significantly improved if teachers only had a more informed understanding of their backgrounds and needs. The ignorance of teachers can manifest itself in what Keeffe (1992:65) described as 'soft racism'; dominant in one half of the population, middle-class Australia, of which many teachers are a part. It can appear in many guises including low teacher expectations of a student's potential, misdiagnosis of classroom behaviour, victimisation of students and ignoring ostracism by student peers, among others (Malin 1997:48). This set of behaviours is often a result of, or may lead to, the stereotyping of Indigenous students.

Similarly, there is a danger of generalising about possible cultural traits that may affect student outcomes. Such traits must not be automatically assumed to exist. For example, McInerney (1992:58)

found in his extensive survey of urban Indigenous students that accepted variables such as affiliation, social concern, competition, self-esteem, extrinsic motivation and recognition were not major determining factors in students' motivational behaviour. The Indigenous population within each school community must be considered unique in those terms.

Related indirectly to stereotyping is the supposed 'deviation' of students in minority groups from educational discourses based on Piaget's conceptualisation of the cognitive development of children in terms of 'developmental stages' (McCarthy 1990:18). In the United States, conventional mainstream education has defined this deviance by using a variety of measures of difference such as IQ tests calibrated on the normative performance of middle-class white males (McCarthy 1990:18). Generalisations have then been made on the results of these tests, typecasting whole social groups. In my experience, the Australian education system has also adopted this practice. Teachers can easily fall into the trap of blindly accepting the validity of what may be considered reliable and credible research without investigating the philosophy behind the methodology.

Another issue which, in my experience, is sometimes raised among teachers is the defensive term "reverse discrimination", where there is a perception that negative attitudes are turned back on the majority group (a term which is often not clearly defined). McCarthy (1990:ix) discusses this with regard to the United States where the 1990's witnessed neo-conservative offensives, supported by government, against the rise in the power of minority groups within institutions. With the suggestion that society was becoming frustrated with current "political correctness", the cry of 'reverse discrimination' is often heard as a reaction against an admission that racism perhaps does exist. Public institutions such as schools are not immune to such attitudes, even though their openness to unprejudiced opinion afforded their professional status may suggest otherwise.

Emphasis is often placed by curriculum developers on the cultural appropriateness of curriculum for minority groups in mainstream education. Nevertheless, change cannot be allowed to signify a

deficit in the equity of education, by offering programs which are of lesser quality to culturally different groups on the pretext of meeting community needs (Cook 1995:102). Patronising attitudes among teachers may arise from ignorance or misinformation about the real educational aspirations of Indigenous people. The attitudes of teachers remain the dominant factor at school in determining student outcomes by their behaviour towards Indigenous students (Keefe 1992:65). From my experience, when issues of behavioural practice are highlighted, teachers often defensively claim their lack of experience and understanding of the needs of Indigenous students. They then revert to examining discrepancies in curriculum rather than questioning their own sets of values. The result of this can manifest itself in institutional racism and thus becomes a means of deterring Indigenous parents and students from mainstream education (Groome 1995:76). Community-based schooling is an alternative for those families who may have physical access to such a choice; for example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community School in Brisbane. However, this isolation of Indigenous students may suggest to some Indigenous and non-Indigenous observers that the dominant society is merely perpetuating a Fourth-World structure that alienates and marginalises indigenous nations from mainstream societies globally (Wilmer 1993:194).

Indigenous politicians such as Senator Neville Bonner were, and some still are, secure in the belief that the future ahead lie in entering the existing bureaucracy (Burger 1979:30). According to the surveys of Keeffe (1992:3), and O'Shane and Bickford (1991:32), Indigenous parents consider that mainstream education provides the most appropriate means of securing a recognised social and economic identity within contemporary Australian society. This can only be achieved if integration is accompanied by self-determination. Serious attempts to secure that identity then must begin. It is not sufficient to implement Indigenous studies in the curriculum without first instigating cross-cultural training for all educational staff in the school (Ogilvie 1994:24).

The approach taken to cross-cultural training can be a contentious issue. Hollinsworth (1992:41) explains

that in Britain and the United States the Racism Awareness Training is the preferred model, one that sees 'White' racism as the problem and is regarded as a moral or psychological weakness. However, in Australia, perhaps where overt racism is not seen as a significant trait of our society, a more liberal view is taken where Cultural Awareness Training becomes one of placing cultural difference and misunderstanding of the 'other' group as the problem. Troyna (1993 cited in Singh 1995:101) also questions the validity of White educators who place the object of racial discourse with the Black rather than the White subject.

This distancing of 'the problem' often determines the type of training used when deciding upon what is considered to be the most appropriate to suit the needs of participants but the delicate issue is not one to be side stepped for fear of offending people's sensibilities. Where contemporary Indigenous issues are the pertinent factors in affecting students outcomes in education today, it is unacceptable to take too soft an approach. Australian cultural awareness training is often de-historicised and mechanistic, and appears uninfluenced by gender, class and ideological divisions (Hollinsworth 1992:42).

The only way that contemporary issues can be understood is to revisit history, one that is a living history for many. Physical, psychological and social manifestations of the government policy of removing Indigenous children from their families (commonly known as the Stolen Generations) has probably been the largest single influence on Indigenous lives today. Teachers could find this revisiting personally difficult to come to terms with owing to the fact that their collective security has resulted from a position of political and economic dominance and exploitation of other people. The situation may not sit comfortably with their consciousness of professional obligation to all students under their care. This cognitive dissonance (Howard 1995:233) could be difficult to deal with even though teachers feel that they have acted sensitively in their personal lives. The opportunity to begin developing a 'two-way' relationship, or partnership, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders must be tempered not with feelings of guilt (which only maintain the concept of perpetrators and victims), but with the recognition that non-

Indigenous people continue to enjoy a position of privilege.

This also raises the issue of who can speak for whom when conducting any cross-cultural training. In attempting to develop a two-way relationship, it is obvious that Indigenous people must play an equal role and either present the Indigenous story or give permission for non-Indigenous representatives to do so.

The inclusion of cultural studies in curriculum may be adequate as an introduction to wider issues, however, if isolated can concentrate on trying to understand 'them' better so that 'we' can do our job better (Pettman 1988:36). It both underlines their otherness and detaches their making from wider, highly political, structures and processes. This is what is being recognised today as the aftermath of assimilation: institutional racism. This is a manifestation of Hollinsworth's (1992:44) definition of racism that states that it is not caused by difference but by conflict over material and ideological resources. Racism is not prejudice, but rather is a relationship of dominance and subordination; that is, a relationship of power.

Power lies predominantly within organised structures such as the government bureaucracy, therefore there is a need to fight institutionalised racism by attacking structures rather than individuals. Stakeholders have a responsibility to be vigilant in questioning the policies under which those structures operate. Martin (1998) maintains that this form of racism, well-entrenched in societal structure today, is sanctioned by the powerful and accepted by the powerless. Since 1989, the Queensland Government has been acting under the recommendations of the National Strategy and from February 1999 has been developing a Queensland policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education (Moran 1999). The present situation is currently under review and being conducted through the Director-General, Terry Moran and Education Queensland. As well as reflecting the recommendations of the National Strategy, which include community participation and cross-cultural understandings, the review will propose specific initiatives to meet the State Government's targets. These targets resulted from the January, 1999 release

A Framework for Increasing the Participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Educational Decision Making published by MACATSIE. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals need to respond positively and ensure their participation in future implementation of the new policy.

Teacher awareness of Indigenous issues becomes much more complex than merely participating in a 'cultural awareness' workshop. It requires the reassessment of previously learned and practised attitudes. By becoming willing to validate Indigenous needs and aspirations, teachers can significantly influence the opportunities for Indigenous Australians to have a meaningful voice in their future. Social institutions become the means by which this can be achieved so it must ask of the school: does it make an adequate effort to seek parents' attitudes, does it use their knowledge and skills, and does it transfer power and accept them as decision-makers?

If Indigenous Australians are to be empowered in mainstream education then it is imperative that they have the opportunity to participate fully in decision-making. The school community, and, in particular, Chatswood Hills State School, becomes the first point of contact for that process to be initiated. Teacher re-education must occur concurrently to ensure success. The prominent Aboriginal leader, Noel Pearson (Koch 1999) states in relation to the success of self-determination, that education is "...the decisive resource [that] government can provide...when you empower people through education, they solve the problems themselves."

4. My Role

My part in the planning and implementation process at Chatswood Hills State School stems from my position as a permanent teacher on the school staff with both a professional and personal interest in the positive outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, my involvement also includes the secondary purpose of assessment for tertiary studies in Indigenous issues. This has been fully explained to, and accepted by, all stake-holders. Specifically, the purpose of this project has been to initiate the process of empowerment. As a prime

facilitator, my first action was the formation of an Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) Committee, providing a means of empowering Indigenous adults in the school structure. This was followed by the introduction of cultural awareness training sessions for teaching and auxiliary staff. The first sessions was conducted by me and included an outline of the proposed plan. It is anticipated that these sessions will ultimately ensure appropriate education of the highest quality for Indigenous students in the school environment.

5. Mutual Objectives

In May 1999, the Ministerial Advisory Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education (MACATSIE) released a publication titled Walking Our Talk: a framework for increasing the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in educational decision-making. The extract below (Figure 3.) outlines the individual roles and responsibilities of students, schools and Indigenous parents, families and communities. It also emphasises mutual interest in achieving these goals. This document validates the plan proposed for Chatswood Hills State School and provides valuable guidelines defined by an Indigenous decision-making body.

Critical Analysis

The formation of an ASSPA Committee and Staff Cultural Awareness Training Workshops have provided the basis upon which a three-year plan for "The Empowerment of Indigenous Australians" project has been instigated. At present, these first two implementations are progressing with varying degrees of success in their initial stages. Both are considered to be areas of on-going developing relationships, involving two, yet interrelated groups of people. The interest shown so far by Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants has been calmly reassuring as to the continuing success of subsequent directions proposed in the plan (Figure 1).

1. The Formation of an ASSPA Committee

The first meeting held was for the purpose of conveying necessary information on the formation,

Schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should work together to establish mutual objectives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR STUDENTS,

SCHOOLS AND ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER

PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The following diagram outlines individual roles and shared responsibilities which are vital for establishing and maintaining effective community participation.

The centre of the circle outlines the shared roles and responsibilities.

STUDENTS
- Positive attitude towards school
- Encouragement from parents/teachers
- Keep families informed about school activities
- Share culture at school
- Contribute to school activities
- Involvement on Committees (ASSPA, School Council)
- Participate in activities such as AITAP and AICAPP, Homework Centres etc.

SCHOOLS
- Understand and acknowledge unique issues that exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families
- Acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols
- Proactively encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community participation
- Be prepared to try different approaches
- Provide an open and welcoming school environment
- Use appropriate procedures to distribute information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Active involvement of Principal

RELATIONSHIPS
- Take time to establish and maintain effective relationships

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS
- Be prepared to look at things from other perspectives
- Strive to understand each others needs

EXPECTATIONS
- Aim to meet each other halfway
- Establish reasonable expectations of what is achievable

COMMUNICATION
- Establish and maintain regular communication avenues

WORKING TOGETHER
- Share the workload
- Share achievements and acknowledgements
- Plan together and evaluate

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES
- Get to know school - staff, students, structures and activities
- Participate in school activities
- Encourage and support student/s with school activities (homework, sports, excursions etc.)
- Become involved on school committees
- Offer assistance and advice on issues (eg. Cultural studies, behavior management program etc.)
- Share culture with school
- Maintain communication with School Councils
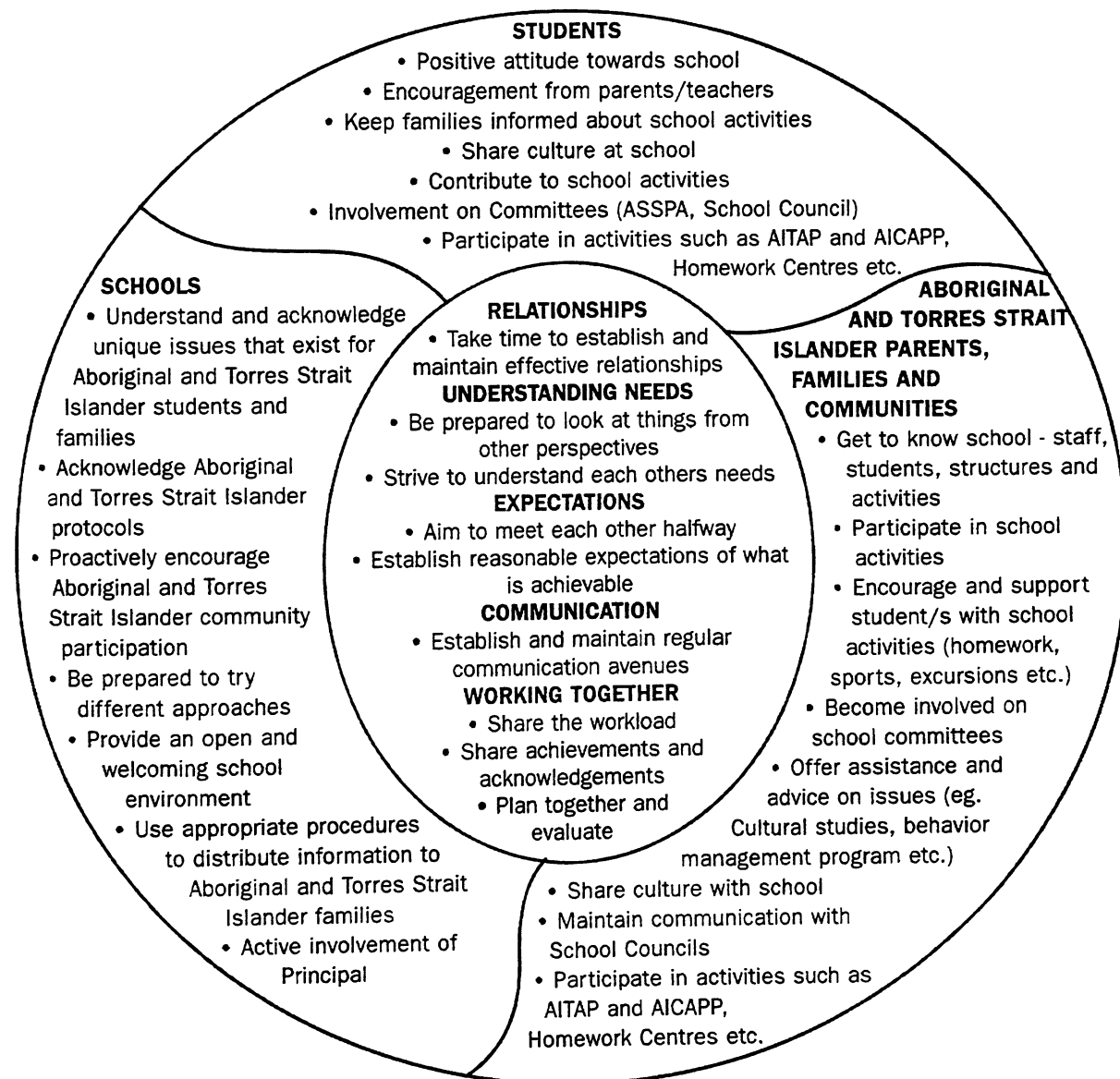- Participate in activities such as AITAP and AICAPP, Homework Centres etc.

Figure 3. Mutual objectives.

purposes and activities of ASSPA Committees within schools. On previous consultations with Indigenous parents, it had been ascertained that none had had any personal experience with ASSPA Committees. This meeting was held during the day because the invited Indigenous advisors were only available during working hours. Unfortunately, no parents attended this meeting and it was decided after further consultation that a night gathering was more suitable for most, even though all had confirmed the day arrangement. The reasons for this may have been two-fold. Firstly, there are reasons relating to persisting issues arising from historical factors in the Queensland education system, as outlined in the theoretical framework. Secondly, there are present social and physical factors; such as, family commitments, daytime employment, social security payment days and routine activities. All these factors would impact on the attendance at a meeting, which to any individual may seem daunting; particularly one that is setting up initial contact between strangers.

The second meeting proved more successful with three families being represented out of a total of five. After a period of introductions and general conversation the information was passed on, even though the advisors could not be present. Although it was intended to be an information night, discussion proceeded easily and by the end of the meeting it was decided that the benefits of the ASSPA Program were warranted at Chatswood Hills school and a committee was formed.

As requested, two Indigenous Cultural Officers from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Branch were invited to attend the third meeting to advise on appropriate ASSPA involvement and the possibilities open to committees. Although this was only meant to be advice, the chairperson was of the opinion that the ASSPA Committee would have little control in the decision-making process; not only in committee activities but also within the school-based management. He questioned the ability of the ASSPA Committee to have any real power in a government system that had continued to perpetuate control over the lives of Indigenous people through discriminatory policies since settlement in 1788. Even though he has these reservations, he decided to continue in the

chairperson's role in anticipation of being able to make a difference, at least at the school level. At this early stage of his relationship with the school, it is not possible to understand how his personal experiences and biases may affect his opinions and expectations. However, his employment does involve contact with commercial and government structures.

Indigenous people have varying beliefs on the effectiveness of working within the hierarchal government system; that is, whether it is worth compromising their ideologies for the sake of what little advancement there has been in Indigenous political power. On this basis it could be conjectured that the chairperson's expectations of the school, and more broadly, Education Queensland, are also ineffectual in apportioning self-determining rights to Indigenous people.

In anticipation of a positive outcome for the future success of the ASSPA Committee, there has been a suspension of communication with the Indigenous members for a short period to allow time for contemplation of the issues involved.

2. Staff Cultural Awareness Training

The sessions to date have included three presentations or workshops by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in partnership. According to the three-year plan (B 2), it is anticipated that further sessions will occur before, and alongside, the development of other phases outlined.

2.1 Introductory Session

My initial contact with the teaching and auxiliary staff concerning the three-year plan (B 2), was in the form of an introductory talk over the period of an hour. It was brought to the attention of the staff that the implementation of strategies to improve outcomes of Indigenous students is a policy recommendation from Education Queensland and has become an integral part of Chatswood Hills State School Partnership Agreement. An explanation of the broad issues arising from the plan were given, and opportunity for questioning was provided.

Feedback from the staff members attending the session was generally very supportive of the proposed plan. All recognised the need for a developing program of cultural awareness training, specifically aimed at providing a more appropriate learning environment for Indigenous students within the existing school setting. Only a few staff had had any experience in teaching Indigenous students in regional or remote communities and most recognised their lack of understanding of Indigenous students living in urban areas. In fact, they admitted a lack of knowledge of Indigenous issues generally. This situation was not surprising given past representations of White history (and the omission of Black history) in the study curriculums of state schools in Australia. It appears that any further sessions will need to virtually re-train staff from the historical beginnings through to their influence on Indigenous issues today.

Many staff members requested strategies for classroom and personal management of Indigenous students. This perhaps indicates a fear of 'difference' that challenges the individual's ethnocentrism and leaves the person feeling vulnerable; a state not enjoyed by one whom always anticipates being in control of a situation. Instead it is necessary for that person to be made aware that cultural diversity does not warrant any individual student being treated differently but only that awareness of difference allows for understanding and better communication.

2.2 Cultural Awareness Session

The presenter of this session was an Indigenous Cultural Officer who shared her personal story with the staff and used questions previously asked by teachers as the basis for imparting information on Indigenous history and current issues.

The staff responded warmly to this personal approach, one that is indicative of many Indigenous people who are generously willing to share their lives in anticipation of working towards a better understanding between cultures. It established a relationship that will enable both the staff and the Cultural Officer to communicate effectively at further sessions in the future. I am highly conscious of the issue of who has the right to speak for whom when dealing with cross cultures matters.

For this reason, I have only conducted the introductory session that explained the overall plan and its administration. By working in partnership with an Indigenous person throughout the training sessions the issue is being emphasised. In this session the officer was adamant in pursuing this idea by saying that she could only relate information about her own cultural legacy in both the private and public arena. This also related to her role as a cultural officer in working with students and schools.

The officer presented her story and other information in such a way that was not confronting. Even though staff felt reasonably comfortable throughout the session, many admitted later that their attitudes and opinions had been challenged in a way that demanded further knowledge and exploration. Suggestions were made that, in addition to later visits by the officer, a discussion group be established to gain clarification of information received and exchange views. (This idea may possibly suggest the formation of a Reconciliation Group some time in the future.)

At this stage it is difficult to ascertain specific beliefs and attitudes held by staff members concerning Indigenous students. Smaller discussion groups would be valuable in giving individuals the opportunity to express and decipher held beliefs that influence their ethical standards. Due to varying degrees of confusion regarding personal beliefs and professional development, I feel that the cultural awareness program must progress slowly to allow time for the staff to come to terms with the challenges being offered them. If not, this confusion will be detrimental to the success of further phases of the plan, particularly those concerned with curriculum development where clear objectives are vital in transferring appropriate concepts to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

2.3 Resource Evaluation and Management Workshop

The same Cultural Officer conducted this workshop as with the staff awareness session. She was assisted in this case by an Indigenous Education Officer who is also a teacher, having the experience to know and understand the needs of staff in selecting and using resources.

All those present were appreciative of the strategies covered in using the selection criteria. Being able to practice the strategies using materials throughout the session consolidated understanding and led to informative discussion. The teacher-librarians expressed the view that the strategies were not only helpful in their selection of materials but also were valuable for passing on to students to use in the choices they made.

Many schools may be limited in the quantity or quality of the material resources they can access. Also, often materials are out-dated or incorrect assumptions are made about the validity of newly published materials. The workshop addressed the reality of school libraries having inappropriate resources and included activities for actually using that material in demonstrating its inappropriateness.

The importance of using culturally appropriate human resources has already been discussed, however, the selection of material resources is often over-looked. Material resources are a significant part of accessing knowledge and concepts for students from both within and outside the school environment. Therefore skills in being able to recognise the validity of content is just as important as the opinions, attitudes and beliefs that teachers may impart by what they say and how they act.

The skills learnt at this workshop would be invaluable when commencing curriculum planning in the future. The workshop only included teacher-librarians who are the personnel most directly involved in selecting and purchasing resources for schools. However, by the end of the session the benefits to be gained by all teachers were clearly evident. It was then decided to repeat the workshop at a later date with all staff members after receiving further cultural awareness training. By then it would be anticipated that teachers would have developed a more solid knowledge base from which to evaluate resources.

Conclusion

After the completion of the first two phases of the three-year plan, I am confident that any further implementations will be as equally successful. The attitude of most staff members and parents is one of supportive encouragement, yet with reserved enthusiasm due to uncertain outcomes of new challenges. All acknowledged those challenges and the timing of their introduction as necessary for recognition of the right of Indigenous Australians to enter the decision-making education process. The introduction of the first two phases; the ASSPA Committee and cultural awareness training, have included the two main *groups of people who have a direct influence on* the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. It is anticipated that empowerment will come to Indigenous Australians in mainstream education directly through involvement in the ASSPA Committee and indirectly, through a heightened awareness of the school staff.

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[1] **Indigenous families constitute the majority of committee members, however there is a stipulation laid down by the Department for Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) that the school Principal (or chosen representative) be an active member (Commonwealth of Australia 1998:7).**

BIOGRAPHY:

Jan Stewart is a non-Indigenous primary teacher with 20 years experience in Victorian and Queensland State schools. She has just completed a BA in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at the University of Queensland. Her involvement in Indigenous issues within mainstream education arises from both a professional and personal interest in social justice. A PostGrad. BEd. course in 2000 will see her investigating links between a multi-aged philosophy of teaching and Indigenous perspectives in approaches to learning. Jan would welcome any comment on the above paper, or the proposed topic. Email: s347406@student.uq.edu.au.

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RESOURCES

1. Service Providers

- Indigenous Cultural Resource Officer, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Branch, Sub-centre, Inala. Ph. 07 3372 5066

- Education Officer, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Branch, Sub-centre, Inala. Ph. 07 3372 5066

- Indigenous Education Officer, Education Queensland, Ipswich District Office, Ipswich. Ph. 07 3280 1791

- Yugambeh Museum, Beenleigh Ph. 07 3807 6155

2. Resource Centres

- Library Resource Centre, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Unit, Inala. Ph. 07 3372 5066

- Yugambeh Museum Library, Beenleigh. Ph. 07 3807 6155

- Logan City Library, Logan Hyperdome, Loganholme. Ph. 07 3209 6133

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Branch, Murri Thusi Web-site URL: http://www.qed.qld.gov.au/tal/atsi/index.htm

- Glenala State High School Reconciliation Model Roger Marshall, Paul Atkinson Ph. 07 3372 2300

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