

## **Whose School? Which Community?**

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### **Introduction**

*In this paper, we take up the theme, 'The School as a Centre in the Community' in light of a research project that we conducted in a remote community in South Australia in 2001. In this project, 'Engaging Students In Education Through Community Empowerment', we set out to explore with Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal students, teachers and representatives of the various agencies operating in the area how groups within the community understood the issues of early exiting Aboriginal students.*

Among the stated aims of the project were: to identify current strengths and concerns regarding the provision of meaningful, culturally inclusive schooling; to map the current knowledge/power relations among various education and support service providers and members of the Indigenous community; and, in the second stage, to develop, on the basis of these consultations and in collaboration with key community and education groups a community-based education project to improve the literacy, numeracy or technological skills of non-attending adolescent students.

What emerged from the consultations with these diverse groups was that the ideal of 'school as community' was problematic especially for Aboriginal families in this community.

In this paper, we interrogate the conversations we had with key representatives of the different community groups. In particular, we consider how 'school as community' did (not) work to address the needs of young Aboriginal students.

We endeavour to critically analyse the diverse perspectives offered to us with the aim, not of 'laying blame' but of exploring where and how cross-cultural communication — a key construct in building 'communities' — continues to fail in the face of diverse bodies of knowledge and inequitable power relations. What does it take to be 'heard'? What is it to listen beyond the 'comfort zone'?

Finally, we discuss a number of recommendations that emerged from this project which aim to build better relations and better school communities.

## **Aboriginal parental involvement in children's education**

### **Review of policy and research literature**

Establishing strong relationships between schools and the families/communities they serve has long been advocated as a necessary component for the education of the nation's children. School/family ties have been cited in many and various articles, policies and research reports as critical to the education of children. In the case of Aboriginal students, this has been extended to culture as the critical element for the successful education of Aboriginal young people.

Aboriginal peoples around Australia have historically experienced education as assimilation. Resistance to an assimilationist education system has generated the inclusion in policy documents of references to the need to teach Aboriginal students from a cultural perspective. The desirability of a 'culturally inclusive curriculum' for Indigenous students and for Aboriginal parents to be able to intervene in the education of their children has been consistently cited in major reviews, including the most recent *National Review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (MYCEETYA, 1995) which drew on and developed previous reviews including the *Aboriginal Education Policy* (1989). *The National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (MYCEETYA, 1996-2000) acknowledges the long-term goal of Indigenous peoples for self-determination in education. This report recognises the need for Indigenous involvement in education at a local, district, regional, state and territory or national level. A major priority of this report was to 'establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples in educational decision-making' (MYCEETA, 1995:11). Amongst the strategies suggested in this report for the participation, engagement and retention in education of Aboriginal students are:

- that schools establish partnerships with Indigenous communities and in particular with Aboriginal Student Support Parent Association (ASSPA) committees to target participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in schools.
- that schools develop and implement programs which recognise home language background and use culturally appropriate instruction and assessment methods, where Standard Australian English is not fully understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, because English is their second or third language or dialect.

and

- Implement culturally sensitive teaching methodologies, which are based upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' preferred ways of learning as well as explicitly teaching them strategies from mainstream schooling.

In *What Works. The Work Programme*, a document which evolved out of the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme's Strategic Results Projects (IESIP SRP's), the authors include in the fundamentals to a good education for Indigenous students, references to respect for students and their cultures.

Cultural dispossession is a terrible thing. It can reduce people to shadows, a state of near invisibility. In the situation of Indigenous students, the case is clear. Aspects of their cultures must be recognised, supported and integrated in the processes of education and training, not just for their own success, but for the general quality of Australian preschools, schools and training institutions.

Of some significance is Boughton's (1997) study that analysed the complexity of the relationship between education and self-determination. Other reports cited in Boughton (2000) indicated that Indigenous students and education workers recognised the connection between education and control as a pedagogical as well as a political issue. This linking of self-determination in education with the content and delivery of curriculum matters and the improved learning outcomes for students within an Indigenous cultural environment has been discussed and documented by Durnan and Boughton (1999) (cited in Boughton, 2000) and by Herbert et al (2000) and Bourke (2000).

These recommendations, particularly the recommendation supporting the recognition of home language in programme design, have particular implications for rural Indigenous communities and schools. In many schools in remote regions around Australia, English is a second and in some cases a third language. In these cases, including the school in which we did our research, an Indigenous language is spoken at home, in the community, in the schoolyard: everywhere in fact, except in the classroom. This further distances the school and the formal curriculum it is attempting to teach from Indigenous communities.

In spite of the rhetoric in policy documents, schools are structured so that there is little opportunity for parents to intervene in the formal education of their children except at a very peripheral level, in organizing sport or accompanying teachers on excursions, hearing students read, working on teacher constructed spelling programmes, working in the school canteen etc. Even participating in these activities places particular demands on Aboriginal parents who may feel that they have to 'act white'

(act 'white' or be marked 'black' is how one parent put it in a recent interview). This can involve dressing in a certain way, adopting particular manners of speech (having good English language skills or changing speech patterns from Aboriginal English to Standard Australian English, for instance), being prepared to be one of very small group of Aboriginal people in a predominantly 'white' workplace and so on. There is generally very little interaction between Aboriginal parents and the teachers of their children. From the teacher perspective, it seems that Aboriginal parents are reluctant to participate in school affairs, a view derived from a discourse of deficit (Herbert et al, 2000). From the perspective of the parents, the world beyond the school fence can be seen as 'alien' territory. The Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) are often used as 'cultural translators' who act as intermediaries between Aboriginal parents and teachers, relieving the school of the need to construct culturally appropriate communicative structures.

Kirkness and Bernard (1991, cited in Herbert, 2000:11) have incorporated the cultural crossover that many children experience when moving from home to school and school to home, into the language of 'coming to: going to' educational institutions: language which suggests students enter sites where education is already structured. Students fit in – or don't.

### **The power relationships of schooling – whose knowledge and whose power?**

Increasingly, the ways in which knowledge/power relations are socially and culturally constructed is recognised in a wide range of educational literature. That particular kinds of knowledge are deemed to be more valuable, worthy, useful or valid, over other kinds, and that only these are carried and thus endorsed by formal curriculum and pedagogies is a way of understanding how relations of power become institutionalised within the schooling process through curriculum content and pedagogical practices. Those whose cultural, economic, community, social and symbolic forms of knowledge remain outside the mainstream, that is those whose knowledge is not 'carried' in/through formal curriculum are frequently positioned as subordinate and understood to be 'disadvantaged'. But it is the practice/experience of being positioned outside the dominant structures (an exercise of power) that creates the disadvantage - not the alternative forms of cultural, economic, social and symbolic knowledge themselves.

In interviews we did with the community who were part of this project, parents expressed the kinds of frustrations with schooling for Aboriginal children that are being expressed around the country: that there is no consistent teaching of mother tongue in the school, that cultural perspectives are not taught across the school and across subjects, that Indigenous knowledge is not acknowledged or accessed through schooling and that the skills and knowledge the children and young people bring to school is

not acknowledged or utilised as a basis on which to build wider understandings and skills development. There are voices that are heard in schools and heard very clearly and there are voices that are part of a 'silenced dialogue' (Delpit, 1993:121). These differential power relations make it difficult for the school to become integrated into the community and for the various community groups that need to and want to access schools to become a part of the school.

A number of writers have discussed these power relations. Bourdieu for instance discusses the power of the school in terms of 'cultural capital'. Delpit refers to a 'culture of power' to frame her thinking about the power relations of schooling. Cultural capital theorists such as Bourdieu see schools as reproducing, constructing and valuing certain kinds of knowledge. This knowledge becomes social capital. The curriculum and assessment procedures for instance, in terms of Bourdieu's theorising, incorporate and construct social capital which then becomes 'symbolic' capital. Symbolic capital is a necessary condition for entrance to employment and further education and links into the preferred knowledges of the economically, socially and politically powerful (Thomson, 2002:4). Delpit's (1993:122) 'culture of power' reflects the rules of those who have power and include the teacher, who has power over students, the publisher of textbooks who has power to direct the thinking of both teachers and students, the power of the system and individuals within the system to determine 'normalcy' and 'intelligence' - both highly contested concepts. Ultimately, given the relationship between educational levels and access to work, then these power relations can have a long-term impact on life chances.

Both Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal students can have a contradictory relationship with the schooling system. That access to the skills and knowledge of the hegemonic curriculum will gain admittance to work and or further education is generally recognised by Aboriginal parents and more often than not, by their children. However, a dilemma is created if the cost of acquiring the knowledge of one culture, the 'culture of power', means having to abandon the ways of being and the ways of knowing of their Indigenous culture.

This potential contradiction is recognised in the MYCEETYA Report (1995:4) the *National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples*, which states that

Indigenous Australians require an education, which enables them to achieve their cultural and academic potential in Indigenous terms as well as in mainstream academic and technological skills.

Herbert, et al., (2000:4) recognise the socialising intent of compulsory education. In this historical context, State controlled schools were expected to transmit the beliefs and values of mainstream

culture. It was recognised that legislation making education compulsory gave the State through schooling, *'access not just to children, but also to working class families through the schooling of their children.'*

This suggests an education focus on the economic needs of Western (capitalist) societies, as well as the need for predominantly mono-culturalism.

Bourdieu's theorising throws light on this relationship between economic and cultural power. Accumulated cultural power begins in early childhood when children learn the 'right' way to dress, the 'right' way to speak', particularly in responses to adults and so on. An incident, which occurred in the school we were researching, illustrates this. A girl student, about year 3, came into the library and asked the Librarian very shyly *"Can I have a book?"* The Librarian replied *"No. May I have a Book please, Ms F..."* The researchers had heard this child speaking in her own language outside the library only a few minutes before, in very powerful ways. However, her power was completely diminished and even eliminated as soon as she entered the Library because she did not know the 'codes', that is the rules of the game. These 'codes' and rules are generally referred to in the literature as 'social capital'.

'Social capital' is defined by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia as a key component in managing change (Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman, 2002). However, the acquisition of social capital depends very largely, according to the theorising of Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1991) on the congruence of individual and institutional cultural capital. The hegemony of particular cultural capital (knowledges, language, shared values, beliefs etc) as the most desirable social capital gives symbolic power to particular socially and economically constructed groups. Much of this symbolic power is acquired through the education system, to those who come into the system with the kind of knowledge and values that are valued by the school. Those whose values/belief systems are not consistent with those of the school will have to *battle* against the system, to use parents' terminology, (Munns, 1998:178) or be failed by the system of education they are attempting to access.

Teachers involved in this project were aware of the dilemmas inherent in the question of 'social capital'. For example, one teacher commented:

*We as school teachers sort of expect, with children coming from English-speaking background or non-Aboriginal backgrounds, that they've got a lot of skills before they come to school, a lot of school skills. Whereas a lot of these students have other skills but not necessarily [those] related to school... So they start off sort of behind*

*the eight ball but they've got a lot of other things to offer. And even just things like being able to understand what classroom rules are and things like that, it will take them longer to adapt to classroom situations...*

There is recognition here that such 'codes' need to be taught. However, incorporated in the teaching of these 'codes' can be an ideology of obedience, of deference for anyone in authority, recognition of some knowledges as superior to others etc. For Aboriginal children, obedience to white authority may not be one of the survival or cultural skills the child has learnt through interactions with family and community. The *National Review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (1995) suggests that learning at school is not a culturally neutral activity. If as Bordieu suggests, a function of schooling is to legitimise the dominant culture, then children coming to school from families who have and pass on to their children the required cultural capital, benefit from schooling. Such cultural capital may include a top-down model of instruction, which fosters respect for authority, the knowledge of experts, discipline and good work habits.

### **Leaving it at the gate – a necessary part of the cultural crossover**

For Aboriginal children to succeed at school, ways of being in the Aboriginal community may have to be "*left at the gate*". This creates a definitive break with community knowledge to take up the 'official' knowledge of schooling. The movement from home to school and from school to home again can have particular meanings for Aboriginal students and can illustrate the separation of school and Aboriginal community. All students bring particular things to school, i.e. family language, cultural ways of doing things, particular ways of thinking about the world and how it is constructed and where they fit into it, what happened last night or this morning. They also take home from school a variety of information and meanings. These can reinforce or contradict community or family knowledge and meanings. The many sets of skills, knowledge and meanings may converge or they may come together in a partial way or they may not come together at all. Where there is little or no convergence at all there may be resistance to socialisation into the milieu of the school. Human agency manifesting itself as resistance is recognised in *The Coolangatta Statement* (1993).

Aboriginal people recognise that education, whether it is rural or urban cited, is a potential source of collective empowerment. However, education structured as schooling also has the potential to deny Indigenous people their heritage.

## **The project: some findings for discussion**

A primary aim of this project was to listen actively to all key stakeholders in the educational process, particularly to Indigenous parents and Elders of the Aboriginal community, and to teachers and administrators at the Area School. Additionally, a number of services are resident and/or active, or have recently been active in the area including FAYS, Centrelink, ATSIC funded services, CDEP as well as the Crime Prevention Unit of the Attorney General's Office and the Aboriginal Services Division of the Department of Human Services. The research team consulted with these agencies, with members of the Indigenous community, with a small group of teachers at the local Area school, and with other service providers in the community.

Our aim was to draw upon the expertise of these diverse groups, to acknowledge their very different cultural perspectives and to try to find the commonalities as well as the differences in order to promote a more holistic approach to addressing the problem: how might key people in the community work together to improve the educational experiences of Aboriginal students? What starting points for changing unproductive relations, processes and programs (as evidenced by the high exit rates) can be designed together so that Indigenous youth can experience education as both personally meaningful and culturally satisfying?

As part of the consultative process that was central to Stage One of this project, we sought to listen closely to different groups' responses to three key questions. Each of the groups who participated in these consultations was asked to speak about: a) what they thought worked to keep Aboriginal children and young people involved in school, (i.e., What helps Aboriginal kids learn? What's good about school? What's keeping the kids at school?); b) why so many Aboriginal young people do not engage with or participate in educational experiences, i.e., concerns about current practices; and c) ideas for improving the educational opportunities for Indigenous children and young people within the local community. Elsewhere (Sanderson & Allard, in press) we discuss the methodological issues that emerged for us as we endeavoured to listen actively.

The research process was initiated in early 2001. In June, after two consultative trips to the region, we circulated an 'Interim Report' on the preliminary findings and our analysis, and returned again to gain feedback from all participants before completing the Final Report on the project in August, 2001.

For the purpose of this paper, and in order to explore the ways that knowledge/power relations are played out in cross cultural communications, and the ways in which a sense of 'community' can



operate as an exclusionary rather than a connective process, we will focus on two issues that emerged in our discussions with key participants in the project: a) the 'issue' of 'small classes'; and b) the question of how and where Aboriginal parents might participate in their children's education.

Each of these issues seem to exemplify key differences between the ways in which Aboriginal parents understood schooling practices and the ways that teachers understood these. Firstly, that of 'small groups'. Making sense of these depended on who we spoke to. For example, the following is a discussion that took place with four Aboriginal mothers in response to the question 'So what do you think the school needs to do to help kids, to give them a spurt on?'

*I think they need to assess them early like give them a test on their ability, so that they can read and write at a very early age. They don't do that.*

*They do assess them, but they don't follow through, which is not fair and they're always putting them in special classes which we do not want our children in the special class. I don't know why they have the special class in the beginning.*

*They thin them out. They don't put them in mainstream classes.*

*I: Right. Why do they have the 'special classes'?*

*Special classes like for those children to catch up, but the special classes offers them more activities rather than giving them curriculum work—all the English and Maths and all that kind of stuff—education work. [...]*

*A special class for me, like when I was going to school in [names regional city], they were the children that had a disability problem, not children that, you know, that's what you call a 'special class'. But today, they're just putting children in special classes just so they can--their education—it's too low.*

*The kids are only going that far - if they can do what they want.*

*They have more free time rather than getting down to the serious business of education.*

*[...]*

*They've got two big girls in the class and all the little ones sitting in it. Year 8s and 9s and primary school kids. Grade 3 and 4.*

*It might sound like we're criticizing the school but all we want is learning.*

*We want the support we need.*

*We have been putting this across to meetings and that—*

*[...]*

*We would prefer them all in the mainstream. We should have got [names another mother] in here too because she's one of the mothers who has her child in special class and that child has been there so long. Every year and she is getting pretty sick and tired of it. Why is she still in that class?*

*I: How old is she?*

*About 9 or 10. So they should be taking her out of there and putting her into the mainstream classes now.*

[Interview Aboriginal mothers, March, 2001]

Alternately, and in response to the question, 'What's working well for Aboriginal students?' one of the teachers involved in setting up this program said:

*One of the things that seem to be going really well as far as getting our kids to school and the kids to interact with each other and they really enjoy that, that sort of small group of staff and, yeah, a sense of sort of belonging I suppose and a sense of ownership, having that class instead of being just one or two or three students in another class. [The small classes] are their classes so they've got a sense of identification.*

*A lot of these students have other skills but not necessarily related to school. Like some of them have never seen, you know, maybe haven't got any books and things at home. So they*

*start off sort of behind the eight ball but they've got a lot of other things to offer. Even just things like being able to understand what classroom rules are and things like that, you know, that will often take them longer to adapt to classroom situations...we do sort of lots of small group work with the Aboriginal students.*

*...The idea of the small classes, they're basically—initially it was sort of special education classes but a lot of them, the children in them, the only thing lacking is their attendance since early years and that's why they are so far behind. So they sort of do more intensive literacy, numeracy...*

*And last year, four or five of our students who had been in a [small] class in the 6 to 9 (age group) actually went back into mainstream. So they had sort of caught up, you know, a fair bit in that time with the intensive thing...*

*[...] I looked at some statistics only a couple of weeks ago on children in [small classes] I made a statement in the school report that I felt that the small classes had certainly had an impact on the attendance and the principal said 'Well, I'll need statistics' so I looked up five or so children. And one who'd had 90 unexplained absences for the year before had gone down to 14 [absences]. And there were five children who had a very similar pattern. There was one child I looked at who'd—hers was not as good but there were lots of family sort of issues going on with that particular child so...*

(Interview with teacher, March, 2001).

Two different conversations concerning the same topic seem to be happening here. How do we 'make sense' of these very different narratives? How do we 'read' these different interpretations of what is (not) working for Aboriginal children as regards 'small classes'?

The very different views concerning 'small classes' presented by the Aboriginal mothers compared to that of the teacher is suggestive to us of a lack of cross-cultural communication. The main purpose of the 'small classes' according to the teacher seemed to be to give the Aboriginal children a 'sense of belonging' and of 'identification' in order for them to feel comfortable enough to want to attend school. Keeping the Aboriginal children together in small groups, rather than 'spreading' them across mainstream classes was a means of helping them 'adjust' to schooling. Intensive work on literacy and numeracy was part of these classes but not the main reason for their existence. That the small classes

were credited with increasing some of the children's attendance was used to indicate a successful strategy from the school's perspective. These worked to enable the children to adapt to the different environment of schooling, to develop the 'social capital' necessary to survive in unfamiliar surroundings. Thus 'special classes' could be understood as a means to assist students to 'fit' within the very different social and cultural context of school. As such, they might have been intended as a transitional stage for children new to the 'culture' of schooling.

The mothers however saw the small classes as a form of shaming, of treating the children as if they were lacking, unable to learn without fun activities and lots of games. Keeping their children separate from the 'mainstream' group made no sense and did not address the educational needs of their children. For the mothers, small classes were a waste of valuable teaching time, a watering down of the necessary reading and numeracy skills. The mothers were acutely aware that these children needed extra help with such skills but did not believe that the small classes were adequately addressing this. Time spent in games was time away from the serious business of learning. And the mothers clearly disputed the idea that the children did move out of the small classes and back into the 'mainstream', arguing that the groups consisted of multi-aged and multi-skilled students. The only thing students appeared to have in common was being Aboriginal.

Listening to the mothers' discussion, we were reminded of the American educator, Lisa Delpit's arguments concerning Afro-American children. She says:

*Not knowing students' strengths leads to our 'teaching down' to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers in the school. Because teachers do not want to tax what they believe to be these students' lower abilities, they end up teaching less when, in actuality, these students need more of what school has to offer. ...Skills oriented approaches that feature heavy doses of readiness activities also contribute to the 'teaching less' phenomenon. Children are typically assigned to these activities as a result of low scores on some standardized test. However, they end up spending so much time matching circles and triangles that no one ever introduces them to actually learning how to read. Should anyone doubt it, I can guarantee you that no amount of matching circles and triangles ever taught anyone how to read. Worse, these activities take time away from real kinds of involvement in literacy such as listening to and seeing the words in real books. (1995: 173-4)*

Children living in poverty don't need *less* of schooling, i.e., games and activities, but *more* of what constitutes skill development to address literacy and numeracy. Failure to do so, failure to set real and

meaningful 'work' only exacerbates the sense of falling behind and the dislike of schooling because students are daily reminded that they don't 'have' what it takes to 'succeed'.

It isn't our purpose here to debate the pros and cons of 'streaming' classes, nor of the 'pastoral care' approach that seems to underpin the school's justification of small classes. Suffice to say that the mothers were deeply concerned and quite clear about what they wanted for their children. They said:

*None of us will argue that leave all the Aboriginal kids in the mainstream classroom and those who weren't able to read or write, then just take a couple of those kids out and get a teacher to sit with that child. Maths and English rather than just have them all as one group every day of the week all together.*

*So what we would like is that our children should be out of the special classes, into the mainstream, and when they are in the mainstream, if that child needs help, offer that child the help and give him extra tutoring lessons for them.*

They also stated that they had tried to convey their perspectives to the school and felt that they were not heard.

When we raised this in our interim report concerning the project 'findings', school staff argued that when Aboriginal children were placed in the 'small classes' at the start of the year, the reasons for doing so had been explained to parents. However, since this issue remained of real concern to a number of parents, (they raised it with us, not vice versa), there appears to be a lack of two-way communication regarding the wishes of some parents and/or the school's purposes for placing children in these classes. That the school saw 'small classes' as a means to increase attendance, and to provide some sense of belonging for the children did not appear to be part of the parents' understandings. Or if this was understood, it was not seen as being a good enough reason for segregating their children, placing them into small classes and out of the 'mainstream', as far as the mothers were concerned.

One way to make sense of this miscommunication is to return to Bourdieu's notion of social capital. All members recognised the importance of the children gaining more of the 'social capital' that schooling offers. Each of the 'players' brought to this particular 'field' of education different understandings/needs/wants: the school through the 'small classes' emphasised the provision of a sense of belonging, teaching them the 'rules' of school, making connections in a supportive group atmosphere so that the children would want to come and continue to attend. The mothers believed that

what the school had to offer were skills in literacy and numeracy. They believed that if the children experienced success early in these key areas, then they would continue to attend, rather than feel shamed and exit early.

The mothers' lack of support for the small classes needed to be heard by the teachers at the school. Failing to see their children make any gains in the areas that they valued most, i.e., literacy and numeracy, to gain the 'social capital' that the school alone could provide, meant that the mothers felt angry, unlistened to and frustrated on behalf of their children. The school was wasting their children's time, not giving them the same skills that were being offered to the 'mainstream' students. In this interpretation, it is perhaps understandable that the parents were less than enthusiastic about what the school could provide to keep their children attending.

There were differential power relations between the teachers who set the agenda and decided which children would be 'promoted' to the mainstream, and the parents who believed they knew their children best and felt their concerns were not being heard. Because of this knowledge/power differential, the sense that the school was part of the Aboriginal community did not exist. The school was seen as ignoring their concerns and devaluing their knowledge about what the children needed, and what the parents wanted from the school for their children.

### **Parental participation: how and where?**

Another issue that emerged from discussions and that is suggestive of the miscommunication between school and community was that of how and where Aboriginal parents could be involved in children's education. That these Aboriginal parents want to be involved in their children's schooling, and that the school sees a real value in having parents involved seems to be the common ground. Where the miscommunication occurs, where the sense of 'community' breaks down, is around the questions of how and when?

The desire to have more Aboriginal parents involved at school was clearly identified by the teachers. One teacher stated, 'We're trying to encourage more parents coming into the school', but recognised that too often parents were only consulted when there were problems with their children. The need to speak more often about the positive achievements of the children was recognised as an important aspect of establishing better relations with the parents.

The Aboriginal language program run within the school was cited as an example where there was not enough participation from Community members to keep it running. The principal commented:

*We run an Aboriginal language program at school and we offer to pay people to be involved in it but can't get anyone to turn up. And members of the community always tend to make the suggestion but then you've got to find the people that are willing to do it. That often happens you know, people say: 'Oh wouldn't it be great if the older ladies would come and dance for this particular thing and everyone goes, 'Mm, yeah, yeah, great idea'...go and ask them and they'll say: 'Oh, you can't do it at \$50 an hour each?' So, I guess that's the issue. The community are keen on ideas but when it comes to who of the community is going to do it and how it's going to be organised, well—that's—a lot of the work falls to the same small number of people to do the organising and to find the funding and write the cheques...*

The ASSPA Committee is intended as a means to ensure that parents do have a say and can participate in their children's education. However, again in discussion with a group of mothers, about this they said:

*I: Does the ASSPA committee have much influence in the school?*

*No. We've got nothing. The only influence we have is we have money coming in and--*

*I: How much do you get for the school?*

*What's the budget? About \$30,000, \$34,000 - I don't know.*

*I: So that was spent on computers?*

*Computers for the whole classroom to use but particularly for Aboriginal students, they had priority, but that didn't work out very well. The Aboriginal kids that wanted to use it had to wait in line so the other kids could use it first.*

*We bought lots of them. We did buy a lot for the children. Laptops for the older kids to use. They've got them. We went broke on that one.*

*[...]*

*I think the school AERT teacher shouldn't run the ASSPA committee members too much either. The teacher tends to be a bit pushy. She's not done her job well last year ...I didn't think very*

*much of her last year. Because we as mothers, as parents, as caregivers whatever, we have to support the children and when they have their party, we have to be there, we have to give that support. Whereas she (the teacher) gave all the money to someone to actually do it. I don't think much of her because she had no respect for the children's ASSPA party...As spokesperson, I don't agree with that.*

*I don't like what she did because it broke every rule that's been there. She broke that rule because, if I do something for the children I am going to—it's with my heart. I'm going to give my time for them. They didn't tell us nothing and we went there and I was not a very happy person. I just walked away again.*

*Here at the school - it doesn't seem like - we talk, talk, talk but nobody comes up - that's why sometimes we just might say no to meetings, or no to people...because no one's helping us.*

*You can come to the ASSPA meeting.*

*I: When's your ASSPA meeting?*

*We have to wait until (the AERT teacher) is ready.*

*She calls the shots.*

*I: She calls the ASSPA meeting?*

*Yes, when it's supposed to be*

*I: The Chairperson calls the ASSPA meeting.*

*Well you met the Chairperson. When they want something, they call the meeting. That's it. When they want something, not when we want something.*

*I: Who decides how the money will be spent?*

*They do...*



## **Who 'knows' best? Acknowledging parents as the first and continuous educators of their children**

Once again, from revisiting these transcripts, we are reminded of how different kinds of 'social' and 'cultural' capital come into play. Once again, we are struck by the two very different conversations re/parental involvement that take place.

As already noted, both Federal and State education systems see the involvement of Indigenous parents in the education of their children as a key issue. However much this aim is centralised in policies, it has been difficult to implement. Indigenous parents have often had negative experiences of schooling, themselves, first with mission type schools and later with mainstream schooling. Historical experiences of racism, assimilation and cultural genocide have made Indigenous parents suspicious of and nervous about entering into Euro-centred institutions, including schools. This, using Bourdieu's theory, suggests that the parents do not feel they have the 'social capital' necessary to successfully engage within the school community.

Just as inhibiting of Indigenous parental involvement in schools is the school structure and decision-making processes (a form of social/cultural capital) that are often foreign to the experiences of many parents and frequently not culturally inclusive. These formal processes are more likely to 'structure out' Indigenous parents rather than create spaces for Indigenous intervention.

One possible exception to this is the ASSPA Committee through which Indigenous parent controlled funds are provided to the school for resources (generally cultural) for Indigenous students. Thus, what little structured 'voice' Indigenous communities have in mainstream schooling is realised generally through ASSPA Committees and through the employment of AEWs. The evaluation of the work and function of ASSPA Committees (ASSPA Evaluation 1999), found that *'[a]ctivities which were reported to have improved attendance as a secondary outcome were those involving parents and cultural activities.'* The evaluation also found that increased parental participation in the school through ASSPA was for many of those consulted a key factor in encouraging students' participation in schooling (particularly primary school students). (ASSPA Evaluation 1999:28).

Cultural activities were also cited as having a positive impact on Indigenous students and educational outcomes:

*Involvement in cultural activities is widely cited by numerous ASSPA Committees, teachers, parents and key informants as resulting in increased student self-esteem, confidence and pride. Such activities also help 'bond' the Indigenous students together, giving them a sense of shared identity from which they derive both strength and support in the school environment. According to some teachers, this 'bonding' has been the crucial factor in encouraging Indigenous students to attend school and importantly, has had a 'flow on' effect in terms of their participation in the classroom' (ASSPA Evaluation 1999:28).*

Importantly, the report also states that cultural activities can have positive effects on both the Indigenous students and on their non-Indigenous peers.

Yet, clearly, from the experiences of those parents involved in ASSPA committee at this school, this has not been a 'space' for Aboriginal parents participation, but instead yet another experience of being 'shamed' and being made to feel dependant on the AERT teacher.

While the Area School staff are adamant that they want Aboriginal parents' to participate, the limitations placed on the ASSPA committee in this school work against rather than for ensuring parental participation. ASSPA meetings (and therefore ASSPA funds) are not controlled by the Indigenous parents, and thus a significant means of having a powerful voice in and influence on their children's education is not operating effectively. Again, the power/knowledge differentials seem to be operating here so that the AERT teacher is the one who sets the time and agenda for the ASSPA committee, the principal determines how parents should participate, and the parents again feel dispossessed and powerless in the experience.

Attempts to involve Indigenous parents in the formal education of their children have encountered difficulties and these need to be understood in terms of just what is it parents are being required to do when they are asked to become involved in the school. In the main, they are being asked to support the school's existing structure and programs. They are being asked to support decisions in which they have not been involved. And they are being asked to support a school system that is largely assimilationist. An exception in the case of the Area School is the Indigenous language programme for which Indigenous people are hourly paid to instruct in their own language and which they saw as valuable. However, that that programme is not functioning well suggests that the current structure and the school's expectations of parents as teachers need to be examined. This could be an opportunity for the ASSPA committee to assume a direct role in reviewing, revising and overseeing the implementation of how the language program can be better supported.

Additionally, a number of parents have sought a homework centre for their children. Establishing this program, auspiced by and with management input from the Aboriginal Community could address the concerns both about the need to provide additional support for children with their schooling, and as well be one forum for more extensively involving other community members, including Elders, in cultural activities with the children.

### **Recommendations for building cross cultural communication in this community**

How can relations of power be (re)negotiated so that collectively the Indigenous community can be involved in the decision making that impacts on their children's formal education? What processes can remake current relations between the school and various groupings within the local Aboriginal Community so that the school becomes part of the community and vice versa?

Ideas (in no particular order) that were presented in the Final Report include:

Aboriginal parents are invited by the school to express their concerns about the use of 'small classes'; teachers are invited to explain their rationale for these. After **mutual** discussion, the parents decide whether they want their children in them.

If the small classes continue, then ensure that there are 'transitional' times when children in the small classes join their larger 'mainstream' peer group for some of their learning. Alternatively, and in keeping with the suggestion made by the parents, provide withdrawal times on individual basis for intensive tutoring sessions with children on a needs basis.

'Social capital' in the 'field' of education (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993) may be gained through interacting with others who may have greater access to that knowledge, to those 'ways of being'. Isolating Aboriginal students does not necessarily enable them to take on the 'codes' expected within hegemonic schooling contexts.

The ASSPA Committee should determine how often they will meet, calls the meetings, sets the agenda (in consultation with key people at the school), invites those teachers with whom they wish to discuss specific issues and decides how funding can best be spent to benefit Aboriginal children. A focus on 'cultural' aspects of learning will enable the ASSPA Committee of parents to contribute in more productive ways to the education of their children. Additionally, the concern expressed by the

Principal as to where the money to cover the cultural dimensions of learning should come from could be better addressed through real negotiation with the ASSPA Committee parents.

In order to assist more parents to participate in the ASSPA Committee and in the programs of the school, (and to address the principal's concern that much of the work falls on too few parents), parents should be in-serviced by ASSPA office holders in the processes of meeting procedures; additionally, the possibility should be explored of establishing a mentor program within the Aboriginal community and between the Aboriginal community and school staff, so that skills can be exchanged and specific areas of knowledge and expertise shared. This process too is part of acknowledging the different 'social capitals' that parents and teachers bring to education. Sharing and teaching the needed skills is another way of the school becoming a more active part of the 'community'.

Reconsider where the 'school' and the 'community' might more productively intersect. For example, using the school bus for after-school or out of school activities or 'in school hours' activities could be reviewed. Making transport available to support cultural and educational excursions, for example, **that children go to the Elders** rather than expecting the Elders to come to the school, or that **Aboriginal language classes occur in the Community**, at times, is a way of challenging the current power differentials. Bringing the 'school' i.e., the children back to the community for lessons would begin to address the sense that the school is an 'alien' environment' for many Aboriginal parents and their children. Instead, by bringing the 'school' activities to the Aboriginal community, new and different ways of interacting, of shifting and/or challenging current power relations could be explored.

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