

ABORIGINAL STUDENT ACTION TEAM: A MODEL FOR ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING.

Introduction.

This story is about efforts to promote Aboriginal educational opportunity in a mainstream school. Northcote High School (NHS) is a government secondary school located approximately six km's from the CBD of Melbourne, Victoria. The school population is comparable with many metropolitan schools, with 1400 students.

The school demographics reflect the growing affluence of the area, combined with a history of post WW2 settlement. While English speaking Australians comprise the largest sector of the student population there are up to 70 languages other than English represented in the families feeding into the school. The largest of these groups include students of Chinese origin and the second generation descendants of the post WW2 migration waves, in particular Greek and Italian communities. Recent migration changes have seen a growing number of Arabic speaking families and a small but significant number of refugee and new arrival settlers from the Horn of Africa and Eastern Europe.

Only a very small number of students are Indigenous – also a common feature of schools in this region of Melbourne. During the last five years Aboriginal enrolments at NHS have hovered at around 10 – 12 per year. The number has varied with the movement of families in and out of the area, with movement of students between family members and with the changing educational needs and ambitions of the students. These features impact directly and detrimentally on Aboriginal student performance, engagement and retention, contributing to the significant educational disadvantage confronting Indigenous Australians.

For many years, NHS leadership has worked towards building a school that tackles discrimination. This commitment is demonstrated through initiatives such as the Equal Opportunity Officer position maintained by the school. Over the 5 year period under consideration here, the school leaders and staff have made a concerted effort to improve the responsiveness of the school to the educational, social and cultural needs of the Aboriginal community. Our intention has been to strengthen the ties between the school and Aboriginal students and their families in order to improve the educational outcomes for these students. The central strategy for pursuing this goal has been the formation of the Aboriginal Student Action Team, and it is this that I will be addressing in this paper.

Aboriginal educational experience in Australia

National and State educational performance data emerging over the last few years indicates Aboriginal students have performed worse and left school earlier than non-Aboriginal peers. Attendance figures show a sharp decline in Aboriginal school enrolment and completion that becomes most pronounced in the post-compulsory years of 10, 11 and 12. Performance in national and state assessment for literacy and numeracy indicates Aboriginal students' rate more poorly, lagging behind same age peers by significant distance. ¹⁺²

Victorian State Government efforts to redress the imbalance are focussed on a range of strategies detailed in “Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future.”³

Impetus for action at NHS

In 2005, staff in the Student Wellbeing team became aware of growing dissatisfaction being expressed by Aboriginal students about their treatment in the school. Reports of racial prejudice were being made to us by some students, while others were becoming involved in disciplinary problems to a concerning level.

The issue came to a head when attempts by a student to challenge inaccuracy of content in an Australian history class led to a heated exchange between the student and teacher. An accusation of trouble making levelled at the student by the teacher was countered with allegations of racism on the teacher’s part. As the incident was being addressed, Aboriginal students and their families expressed anger at the lack of cultural sensitivity being shown by some teachers, who in turn were defensive and affronted by the allegations being raised by families.

In an effort to understand the issues being raised and to mediate the conflict that was building, the Student Welfare Coordinator (SWC) and I initiated discussions with Aboriginal students and their families. We wanted to test an assumption that in their expressions of anger, students were communicating the sense of disempowerment they felt in their school life, reacting to the racism they perceived in their treatment at the hands of some students and staff.

We provided a space for Aboriginal students and their families to meet and talk safely and openly about their concerns. They confirmed they felt angry with their treatment by the school and expressed the view that the school was not interested in or respectful of their culture and heritage. The Student Wellbeing Team agreed to create a forum through which they could identify issues and take action to address the concerns with administration and teaching staff.

Why an Action Team?

Through this forum, it quickly became clear that the initial concerns were symptomatic of deeper challenges within the school community. Relationships and attitudes among some students and staff were reflecting a lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture and heritage, leading to an increasing disengagement of Aboriginal students from the larger school community.

The Wellbeing Team and school leadership wanted to find a way to begin challenging some of the entrenched expectations and perceptions, so Aboriginal students would be supported in achieving their best within this mainstream school. The Aboriginal students and families were in agreement. Shaping the forum into an Action Team offered the means to not just seek ideas from students, but to involve them in real and significant change – to provide a voice with which their concerns could gain legitimacy and currency. In a climate where Aboriginal students had come to see themselves, and to be seen, as fringe dwellers, we wanted to create a view of their abilities as academic achievers and as student leaders.

Aims and objectives

The primary aim of the Aboriginal Student Action Team has been to strengthen the ties between the school and Aboriginal students and their families in order to pursue activity that would reduce the impact of the educational disadvantage confronted by these students.

To achieve this aim a number of complementary strategies were required. These were:

1. Improve the engagement of students and their families with the school;
2. Contribute to improved student learning and school performance;
3. Provide vehicle for student leadership for Aboriginal students;
4. Improve awareness and understanding in the school community of Aboriginal culture and heritage.

What makes an Aboriginal Student Action Team?

Initially, the ASAT comprised only indigenous students. A series of weekly meetings was held in the Wellbeing office at lunchtime throughout late 2005, into early 2006. Students were drawn from Years 7 – 10, and with guidance and supplies of chocolate, began to identify priorities and pursue action plans.

As a matter of principle, we worked to ensure the decisions of the group were made by the students themselves. Similarly, we were clear that responsibility for following up tasks also lay with the students.

As facilitator, my role was to guide the discussions and to encourage and support them in taking appropriate action towards their goals. Importantly, it was also to engage in discussion with the Principal, leadership team and staff to win support for the group and the efforts they were making.

At times we undertook action in parallel with the students. For instance, while the students were campaigning for the Aboriginal flag to be flown, I arranged for the mounting of a plaque acknowledging traditional ownership of the land on which the school stands. The presence of the school Principal alongside a community Elder at the formal unveiling of the plaque provided a powerful and enduring message of support for students in their struggle. Professional development was also arranged for the staff team, increasing awareness of Aboriginal heritage and of the impact of prejudice.

Late in 2006 an invitation was extended by the Team to non-Aboriginal students who shared in interest in indigenous affairs to join the Action Team. Planning and running a camp to the Barmah State Forest, home to the Yorta Yorta people, proved to be a pivotal step towards linking Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members together. This represented a significant shift towards cultural recognition for the students and families.

Key elements to the ASAT

In reviewing the operation of the ASAT, there are a number of factors contributing to the success of this model for practice.

1. Confidence and trust of Aboriginal students in the staff facilitating the group is essential. The work of the Team requires students to move well outside their comfort zone. For some, the tasks and roles they take on as part of the ASAT are foreign and challenging. Even the act of articulating their thoughts and feelings in a group setting and to staff – non-Aboriginal staff especially- can be difficult.

Staff must be willing to actively and openly learn alongside the students in order to earn their trust and respect. They must be aware of the power issues that exist in the student staff relationships and in relationships between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and be willing to shift this, or at very least to acknowledge the impact of these issues.

2. Communication with families plays a crucial part in gaining and keeping their confidence and support. Often, the parents and extended family have experienced entrenched obstacles in their experiences with the education system. The ASAT invites these families to convey the commitment they bring to their children's' education; to communicate what they believe is important in achieving this; and to bring a valued contribution to making it happen.

3. The creation of opportunities for "real" learning with visible, tangible benefits grounds the ASAT in a reality that makes sense for students. To be able to undertake research that directly links to cultural heritage and to see this research contribute directly to curriculum reform and classroom learning; to see the Aboriginal flag flying and to understand the processes through which they made it happen – these things make a powerful impression.

4. Mentoring and peer support have played a big part in the ASAT. The evolution of the Team has allowed older students to provide natural leadership for younger students, and for the younger members to grow into increasing responsibility. This mentoring has been structured as formal activity at times, such as the delivery of sports training by ASAT members to local primary school students. At other times it can be recognised as an innate part of the relationships developing within the Team.

5. Establishing links within the wider Aboriginal community has also proven to be important. By building connections through families into the community, the school has had the chance to understand and engage with the intricacies of family and network ties that typify the Aboriginal community. Students have the opportunity to demonstrate to their own community the strength of leadership and communication ability they are developing, to feel the pride of achievement as it is recognised and applauded. This connection between the school and their community also served to foster a sense that the school could become a place of cultural safety for the students.

Challenges

The main challenges facing the ASAT included:

1. Maintaining the focus and engagement of students and families. Life gets busy, priorities change and holding to task is never easy. Naturally, as students reached more senior years of school, they had to prioritise study, leaving younger students who were sometime ill-prepared or unready to step up. At other times, students simply get distracted by life – this is adolescence remember – all sorts of things can get in the way.
2. Change comes slowly, and adolescents are not renowned for patience. Students struggled with the frustration of long and inexplicable delays – things that should be simple rarely were. Learning to distinguish whether delays are intentional or not, and how to maintain momentum when things are stuck is not easy.
3. Changes in group membership were frequent. Families moved from the area, students moved between parents / carers, shifting school in the process. With each change, knowledge and experience is lost and progress sacrificed.
4. Retaining school leadership support and attention for the issues promoted by the ASAT also requires continuous negotiation and strategic positioning. Access to time, space and influence with school leadership are all hotly contested, and the success of ASAT initiatives relies heavily on the support of the leaders. Change to curriculum, policy and school ethos will not occur without the will of the administration.

Outcomes.

The Aboriginal Student Action Team has produced some notable achievements over the last 4 years, with some lasting legacies in evidence at NHS.

Students who participated in the ASAT report great positive value in the leadership opportunities they have taken. A number have gone on to participate in community advocacy forums, such as Reconciliation Australia and the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advocacy Council. One Aboriginal student successfully completed VCE last year- the first to do so in this region of Melbourne for many years. Another is poised to graduate this year and gain entry to Melbourne University in 2010.

For the school community, the work of the ASAT has been the impetus for widespread improvement in cultural awareness and sensitivity. Professional development has been undertaken by staff to increase racism awareness as well as begin a move towards greater cultural competency. Strategies for improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are now embedded in the NHS Annual Plan. The lead shown by staff of the Wellbeing Team in promoting indigenous education has been taken up by other local schools and agencies. As a result, a regular forum has been running for the last twelve months bringing these groups together to explore effective learning tools and techniques.

NHS now flies the Aboriginal flag at all times; offers “acknowledgement of country” at all school assemblies and gatherings; and proudly displays the plaque acknowledging traditional ownership of the land on which the school sits. While these may be criticised as tokenistic, these symbolic gestures are highly valued by Aboriginal students and families for the way they represent visible cultural recognition.

As Mick Dodson noted in his address to the Australian National Press Club in February this year

“So-called symbolic steps like the apology, like acknowledging country, like constitutional reform, like giving a child pride in their culture: these are all practical steps that change the way we think and feel and act.” 4

Conclusion

On a personal note – the benefits of facilitating the Aboriginal Student Action Team have been enormous, the undertaking has changed the way I work, think and feel. To see the growth and development of the students as they embrace a voice of political activism in pursuit of change on behalf of their community makes me feel privileged and proud.

The ASAT has been a roller coaster ride; at times bringing despair that anything will ever change, at others, elation at the successes we have gained, at the joys and sorrows we have shared. While not without limitations, I believe the ASAT model has contributed to a fundamental shift in the pursuit of improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Rob Mason

2009

References.

1. The Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (2007).
2. "A Fairer Victoria: Building on our commitment" DPC, Victoria (2007)
3. "Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future".
Education Strategy for Koorie Students DEECD Victoria 2008
4. Prof. Mick Dodson, Director, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU - Quoted in
The Age Feb 19 2009 "Our schooling shame"

Appendix:

ASAT Staff Acknowledgements

Shared credit and unconditional thanks must go to a number of people for their work with the ASAT.

Deborah Pyke has been a formative member of the ASAT at NHS. She has played an integral and invaluable role in establishing and facilitating the Team over the entire period of operation.

Karen Stott has picked up the running in 2008, bringing fresh energy and enthusiasm to the Team.

Tim Delany was integral to the revision of Yr 9 History curriculum.

Appendix:

Aboriginal Student Action Team:

Timeline of Key events and activities

2005 – Informal discussions initiated with Aboriginal students and with NHS staff

2006

- Formal establishment of ASAT
- Peer mentoring with Thornbury PS / Joint NAIDOC activities and celebrations
- Plaque acknowledging traditional ownership of land endorsed by NHS Council and unveiled with Elder, Auntie Rochelle Patten presiding
- Racism awareness training for all NHS staff
- NHS initiates and hosts “Regional Convention on Reconciliation”
- Links established with local agencies: Vic’n Aboriginal Education Assoc. Inc (VAEAI); DEECD Northern Metro Region, Koori Education Development officer
- Family participation formalised: planning undertaken for ASAT Camp activity; start of initiative to get funded educational support for students

2007

- Yorta Yorta Cultural Awareness camp – Barmah State Forest: ASAT members visit country, interview Elders collecting primary source research material; determining action priorities for the year
- Flag campaign leads to Aboriginal flag permanently aloft
- Celebrations / activities to mark key days: Sorry Day; the Long Walk; NAIDOC
- Yr 9 Australian History: curriculum revision incorporates source material collected at Barmah camp by ASAT
- Elders in classroom supporting History lessons
- Indigenous Sexual Health program offered to Aboriginal students
- Submission to C’wealth Dep’t Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) for funding through Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI) to employ Aboriginal Education Support Worker
- Acknowledgment of Country offered at major school functions such as assemblies

2008

- Rudd’s Apology to the Stolen Generation– school community stops to listen
- Aboriginal Education Support Worker employed for 12 month position
- Reconciliation Race Around Town –activity initiated and led by ASAT members – participation by local primary and secondary schools.
- Flag raising ceremony to mark NAIDOC
- Aboriginal language and culture lesson for staff / students provided by parent / Elder.