INDIGENOUS CHILDREN & YOUTH:
Issues and underlying factors

Background paper to presentation by Dr Penny Tripcony
Child Protection Peak Ltd
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1.   *INTRODUCTION*

It is often claimed that *our children are our future,* yet in the whirlwind pace of contemporary Western society with its focus on a developing global society and economy, there is little to suggest that this claim is taken seriously. Through the media, we learn daily of child abuse, teenage crime and violence, juvenile substance abuse, and increased rates of youth suicide. Our schools are attempting to deal with unacceptable student behaviour and many are failing to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy competence.

Like canaries in coal-mines, our children are reacting to elements in their environment. What is happening to our children is an indicator for our society. We need to reflect on priorities and redefine goals and directions. It is our place - as concerned adults, professionals, parents, carers and community members - to urge our leaders to provide the means to effect change.

From both media reports and research, it is evident that these matters relate to some groups of young people more than others - that the incidence of abuse, crime, violence, educational underachievement, etc, correlates, I believe, with the degree of vulnerability of particular groups, for example, those from low socio-economic areas, etc. Of these, Indigenous Australians (particularly Aboriginal children and youth) are the most vulnerable and consequently, the most affected.

2.   *BACKGROUND*

In settling this country, the English brought with them ethnocentric notions of class and race accompanied by a history of exploitation and abuse of children, women and men. Like other Europeans who had made contact with Aboriginal groups, they neither saw nor understood the complexity of Aboriginal society, organised into moieties, clans and intricate kinship systems based on strictly applied laws and observances. Because there appeared to be no recognisable formal government, there was no acknowledgement of existing systems of authority based on physical and spiritual knowledge and experience – systems where social control was maintained by way of reciprocal rights and responsibilities towards other people and towards 'country' or place.

The early ethnocentrism is evident in specific policies and practices of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century; and in turn their legacy is the appalling state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies today - not the least of which is the range and rate of issues affecting our children and young people.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 Indigenous Australians 2001

The report of the national census conducted on 7 August 2001 states that the resident Indigenous population of Australia was 410, 003, or 2.4% of the total resident population of Australia. The Indigenous population comprises two distinct groups - Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders – who live in a range of locations, loosely defined as remote, rural and urban. Of the recorded Indigenous population, Torres Strait Islanders comprised 6.4%, Aborigines 89.0%, and 4.3% were reported to be of both origins.

From available census data on geographic location, size of household, language/s spoken, employment and income status, it is evident that there continues to be a diversity of Indigenous groups and individuals. No so obvious, however, are the links between groups throughout the continent, strengthened by surviving kinship systems (sometimes referred to as 'extended families'); the relevance of place or 'country'; shared experiences of history, colonisation and prejudice; and the continuation of sophisticated systems of beliefs, expressed in oral histories, ceremonies, songs, paintings, dances and social relationships (Eades, 1994).

What remains of Indigenous socio-cultural order is being seriously undermined by multifaceted social disorders seriously affecting the wellbeing of our families and communities.

The *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2001* provided the following data.

- The 2001 Census of Population and Housing reported that a total of 410,003 or over 2.4% of Australians identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

- Of the reported Indigenous Australian population, 57.6% were aged 24 and under; and only 6.7% were aged 55 and over (non-Indigenous persons represented 34.0% and 22.0% respectively).

- 12.9% of Indigenous children are aged between 0-4 years – double the non-Indigenous rate of 6.4%.

- Of interest, also, is data from the National Schools Statistics Collection, which reported 9,596 schools in Australia with 115,465 Indigenous students enrolled in 2001, representing 3.5% of total school enrolments. Of these, 68.4% (78,943) were enrolled in primary schools - twice as many as the 31.66% (36,522) enrolled in secondary schools. A majority of Indigenous students (87%) were enrolled in government education systems, compared with 68% of non-Indigenous students.

4 THE NEED FOR PREVENTIVE MEASURES

An indication of the extent to which Indigenous children and youth are subjects of child welfare and juvenile justice action is the following information, from the *National*

Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, which reported that *...Indigenous children are six times more likely to be removed for child welfare reasons and 21 times more likely for juvenile justice detention, than non-Indigenous children.* (1997:31).

The 2001 Census reports that the overall Indigenous population is greater than that recorded by the 1996 Census. However, Indigenous mortality trends over recent decades have shown little improvement in life-expectancy, while the rate of births has increased. If juvenile justice detention and care and protection rates of Indigenous children and youth have remained at least proportional to the overall Indigenous population*,* preventive measures must be implemented urgently if we are not to be swamped by a *tsunami* of Indigenous children's issues, and because of the considerably shorter life expectancy rate for Indigenous Australians, there is a diminishing group of Indigenous elders to call upon for advice and support.

5.   *CAN EDUCATION ADDRESS THE ISSUES?*
In their final report to the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament, the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation stated that:

> *A constant theme of Council's consultations has been that 'education is the key' to achieving reconciliation. By this, people imply three things. They seek education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in culturally sensitive ways to a point where they can participate as equals, with good jobs and economic security. They seek education of decision-makers and people who provide services so that they work through respectful partnerships and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Finally, they seek education of the wider community to understand the issues of education.*

(Council for Reconciliation, December 2000, p.53).

However, for many Indigenous Australians, participation in education is not straightforward. For example,

Factors affecting Indigenous participation in education
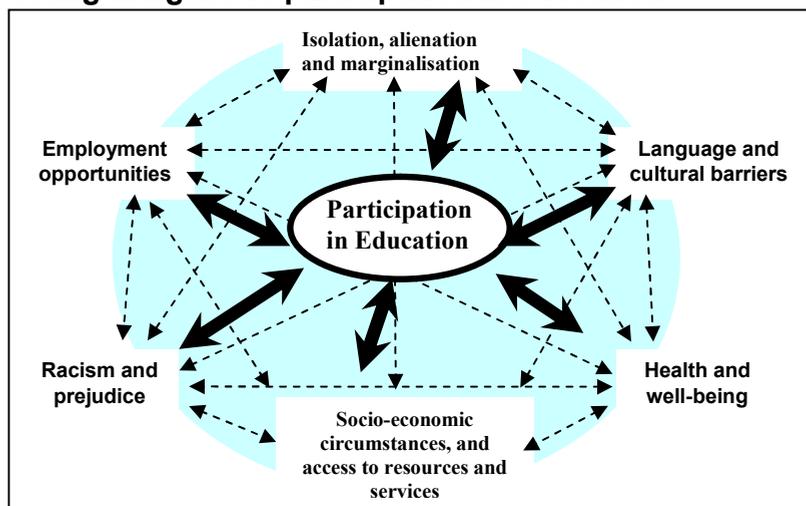
Isolation, alienation and marginalisation
- Influence of distance and socio-cultural and geographic isolation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation in school.

Language and cultural barriers
- The interest and relevance of curriculum and test materials for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
- Cultural identity and linguistic backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and communities.
- Incorporation and recognition of ways of knowing and learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Accessibility of, for example, information and ideas, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for whom Standard Australian English is not their first language.
- Community decision-making processes.

Racism and prejudice
- Inclusiveness and cultural appropriateness of assessment frameworks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- How learning is valued.
- Racism and prejudice in schools towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Involvement of community members, parents and carers.

Health and wellbeing
- The influence of violence on students' participation in school.
- The influence of health factors (particularly hearing impairment) on students' participation in school.

Socio-economic circumstances and access to resources and public services
- Appropriateness of resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Equity of access to and availability of resources.

Employment opportunities
- Influence of employment opportunities on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation in school.

5.1 *A multitude of studies*

Indigenous communities say that we are the most researched group in Australian society, and they are right. During the last two decades alone there have been numerous inquiries, Royal Commissions, commissioned projects, individual, collaborative, inter-agency, government and non-government research studies of various aspects of Indigenous health, education, justice, housing, substance abuse, and so on. Findings from the spate of investigations have produced hundreds of recommendations for action. From these research studies, Indigenous people know what the issues are. We know that, in

addition to the already cited rates of Indigenous children under care and protection orders, and those in juvenile detention centres…

- A high proportion of Indigenous people live in poverty;
- In education, Indigenous children have the lowest access, participation, retention and achievement rates; and high rates of suspension and exclusion;
- Indigenous people experience the worst health, described in reports as 'third world';
- Alcoholism and/or other substance-abuse is out of control - particularly in some remote communities, and among urban teenagers;
- Reported incidents of domestic violence against Indigenous women are 45 times greater than reported incidents against non-Indigenous women;
- Incidents of child-abuse have increased;
- Youth suicide is increasing;
- There is high unemployment: again, this is particularly so in remote locations;

For the present, Indigenous Australians generally, do not experience real inclusion within education processes, nor within Australian society. Indeed, in the words of Mick Dodson, *'When the rhetoric… refers to "inclusion", we would ask, "Inclusion into what?" The unspoken answer is inclusion into political, economic and social structures which are themselves culture specific and exclusive.'*

Although the notion of a reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians has grown in recent years to become 'a people's movement' - demonstrated by the thousands of people who marched in cities and towns across the country in May and June, 2000 - racism and prejudice continue to exist. There is little real inclusion – that is, inclusion on equal terms with Anglo-Australians - and it will take a long time to change negative attitudes in order to achieve it. As Indigenous Australians, we do not have the time to wait for such change to occur. We must continue with the progress we have made during the past forty years.

To do this, we need to observe and possibly replicate the qualities possessed by Indigenous Australians who are recognised as working successfully. It seems that each of them has the ability to move confidently between their own Indigenous cultures and the dominant Australian culture.

> *'One or more "bicultural figures" appeared frequently in most successful projects. These people had the capacity to operate comfortably in both white and Indigenous societies, interpreting each to the other with the respect of members of each.'*

While we work towards real recognition, inclusion and equality as members of Australian society, I believe we should aim for our children to gain the skills and knowledge to be bi-cultural – to be able to confidently communicate with and/or work within mainstream organisations, while at the same time maintaining their own unique identities and connections with their families, communities and cultures.

'The freedom and capacity to interpret and to move fluently amongst cultures is an inescapable condition for the mastery and enjoyment of modern life, and for participation in democratic society and the wider global community.'

- For many Indigenous families, living conditions are overcrowded and accommodation standards are poor; and
- Arrest and incarceration rates continue to be significantly greater for Indigenous people than those of the wider community.

There are enough reports with evidence to support recommendations that can form the basis of strategies for action.   More recent or emerging issues may appear as gaps in studies to date, and may require additional research to add to or amend current strategies for action.   Any further research should be as non-intrusive to Indigenous families/communities as possible, and conducted as components of active programs for addressing current issues. Indigenous communities must be consulted and established as leading partners in any additional research, planning, program development and delivery.

5.2   ***Some issues for specific attention***
a)   With reference to the rates of incarceration of young Indigenous males (final point, 5.1 above) a further (and somewhat alarming) dimension was publicly reported by Tony Koch, *Courier-Mail* journalist on 13/3/99, that *...north Queensland's correctional centres have become part of the 'rite of passage' to manhood for young Indigenous offenders.* This adds another dimension to perceptions of criminal activities, whereby young men with low self-esteem and self-worth feel important and valued by their peers only through defying, resisting and breaking the law, and the consequent period of incarceration. Only urgent positive intervention will stem the rapid spread of such misperceptions.

In his article, Koch further quotes the report: *The current disproportionate representation of young offenders in custody is a reflection of the wider problems of poverty and unemployment combined with a breakdown in traditional family and community relations*…thus supporting the views of Indigenous communities, and leading in to the next point.

b) Further issues of concern in relation to today's Indigenous children and youth is the short and long-term effects of institutionalisation and poverty on Indigenous families.

6.   *UNDERLYING FACTORS*
During any planning, research or program implementation with Indigenous communities, families or individuals, it is imperative to recognise that specific factors underlie the many issues to be addressed. All issues are strongly connected to the inextricably linked factors of race and power, which influence concepts of culture and identity, and inhibit the effectiveness of programs

There is not now, nor has there ever been, such things as the Aboriginal culture, or the Torres Strait culture. Aboriginal societies and Torres Strait Islander societies form two distinct Indigenous Australian cultural frameworks within each of which is a number of diverse groups or communities. As in mainstream society, each group is comprised of individual members sharing the basic elements of group culture, but at the same time each has their own views on a range of issues. Groome (1996:4), who has worked with Aboriginal people in a range of locations for most of his life, writes of this notion of culture, as follows:

> *Faced with the evidence of the destructive effects of traditional understandings of the word 'culture' many theorists over the last decade have advocated new interpretations of the term. There is now a range of concepts being discussed. All of these share one aspect in common. They have sought to move away from the concept of culture as a fixed entity, a complex of concrete behaviour patterns, customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters… Instead they have sought to stress the role of individuals over and above that of groups in forming patterns of personal cultures.*

Thus culture -which includes knowledge, beliefs, values and behaviours shared and learned by members of a group and passed on to their descendants - is also a construct which is neither fixed nor measurable, but dynamic…*a living organism that is continually being constructed by individuals in the course of their day-to-day living.* (*Ibid.,* p.5), Culture, then, is the foundation upon which individual identity is built.

Keeffe (1992) - also with considerable experience of Aboriginal tradition-oriented and urban communities – sees the maintenance of specific cultural identities by Indigenous Australians as forms of both resistance and persistence within the context of imposed Western lifestyles, values and cultures.

Many observers and theorists link culture and identity, and add that critical periods for the formation of identity is childhood and adolescence. For each of us this means that through our interactions with children or youth it is possible to influence their thinking, their behaviour, and ways in which they individually (or as groups) construct their identities. We can 'make or break' them as children and, in the longer term, may influence their potential to become contributing members of society.

Given the living conditions and major social issues of many of Queensland's Indigenous families and communities, the implications of children's identity formation influenced by daily occurrences are of great concern, and requires urgent action.

Social inequality is related to unequal power relationships. Within the structure of Australian society, Indigenous people have been described (as recently as the last few years) as 'the lowest rung of the ladder', which is an indication of the relationship between power and race.

Our children become aware of this at a very early age.

> *As they travel, shop and watch TV, Indigenous children begin to meet a world in which they rarely see Indigenous faces. Most become aware of hostility towards them and their family in many settings. This awareness of a different world is dramatically confirmed when they first attend school. Suddenly they are in a new, overwhelming, environment in which they are very clearly a minority, and sometimes a despised one.* (Groome, 1995:20)

Indigenous Australian children have distinct roles and responsibilities within their families and communities. They are included in adult gatherings and discussions, and through these they are aware of issues of race and power. They know that specific legislation, policies and practices - whether positive or negative - have been developed or undertaken on the basis of race. They know, too, from their parents and/or other adults within their families and communities, that in a world where power is linked to financial wealth, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people possess little of perceived value, consequently as groups within current social strata they have no bargaining power and no say in directions for the future of this country.

Indigenous Australians both young and old are aware of where they, as a group, are positioned within Australian social structures. The present notion, based on issues of race and power, will take years to change. Many programs implemented in the past have been ad hoc, short term, and lacking in phased levels of support, ie. resources, training and employment. Long-term plans need to be negotiated and implemented with Indigenous groups and communities, to include a range of strategies designed to empower, to raise self-esteem, restore self-respect and guide towards positive outcomes.

Research, education and training, in any sphere of activity, are in unusual positions in this regard. On the one hand, programs can reflect and reproduce social values, lifestyles, etc, yet they can also develop the knowledge and skills to contribute to social change and justice; hence programs can be both positive and negative, both enabling and constraining.

7. TURNING THE TIDE

a) Indigenous communities consider that current 'problems' or issues are due primarily to the breakdown of Indigenous cultural and social order, requiring both short- and long-term planning and coordinated holistic remedial action to restore the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the total community and its environment; and in so doing, raise self-esteem and improve self-worth among our young people. Many programs implemented to date have been 'band-aid' measures addressing specific issues, but no single issue can be addressed in isolation.

b) It is essential that Indigenous self-determination is recognised and supported. Indigenous people are well aware of, and seriously concerned about, the many problems that exist in our communities. It is our right to have real opportunities…to be empowered… to address these.

c) In consultation with Indigenous communities, terminology (such as *welfare, neglect,* etc.,) needs to be re-defined within the context of Indigenous family structures, responsibilities and obligations.

d) If solutions are to be found, government departments and agencies planning and implementing programs must do so collaboratively and with local Indigenous community groups/organisations. They must value community input, as well as encourage the growth of community responsibility and ownership of programs.

e) Community members must be employed and/or trained to assume leadership, professional and practical roles in programs being implemented; thus empowering Indigenous communities to conduct their own programs.

f) In accordance with Indigenous community concerns, programs must include parenting skills that conform with Indigenous family and kin structures, values and obligations.

g) Any further research studies should be planned in consultation with relevant Indigenous groups or individuals, and should train and employ Indigenous researchers.

h) Research reports must be made available to the respective Indigenous community, in a form and at a time previously negotiated with that community.

To our fathers' fathers, the pain, the sorrow…
To our children's children, the glad tomorrow.

(Oodgeroo of the Noonuccals)

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