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# 'Research as Dialogue' and Cross-Cultural Consultations: Confronting Relations of Power<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, we discuss methodological issues that emerged as we worked through a small empirical research project, 'Engaging Aboriginal students in education through community empowerment'. Recent national policy statements (see, for example, MCEETYA 2000, NBEET 1995) argue the importance of education/research that keeps the locus of control within the Aboriginal community as a means to further the goal of self-determination and improve educational outcomes. In keeping with these recommendations, our project aimed to challenge assimilationist frameworks and sought to 'empower' members of the local Aboriginal community through participation in the project.*

*'Research as dialogue' was a guiding principal and a primary aim was to listen actively to all key stakeholders in the remote community setting, particularly to Indigenous parents, students and teachers, in order to identify current strengths and concerns regarding the provision of culturally inclusive schooling. A proposed second stage of the project is to develop, on the basis of these consultations and in collaboration, community-based education projects that engage non-attending Aboriginal students.*

*Here we discuss the consultative processes undertaken in stage one of the project, and critically analyse the difficulties as well as potential strengths of trying to form collaborative partnerships as researchers across cultural differences and with diverse community groups.*

## Introduction

'Engaging Aboriginal students in education through community empowerment'<sup>2</sup> was a small research project conducted in 2001 in a remote region in South Australia.<sup>3</sup> The remote community has a relatively large Indigenous population, and Aboriginal children make up roughly one third of the area school's student population.

Previous research done in the community identified a high level of absenteeism and exiting of young Indigenous students from school as early as Grade 5, a problem associated with many Indigenous communities but one that was particularly prevalent in this location. This project set out to explore 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 proposed second stage of the project, to develop a community-based education project to improve the literacy, numeracy or technological skills of non-attending Aboriginal students, on the basis of these consultations and in collaboration with key community and education groups.

In this paper, we discuss a number of methodological issues that arose as we consulted with the local Aboriginal community and with other key stakeholders, including school-based personnel. We use some of the data from the project as a means to illuminate the key questions on which we focus here. Elsewhere (Allard and Sanderson 2002) we report in detail on the specific findings of the project, noting the various educational programs that have been put in place for Aboriginal students by the school and how these are perceived by the Indigenous community. Here, we foreground specific research issues and our reflections on them in order to highlight dilemmas that remain to be addressed when 'doing' educational research with Aboriginal communities, dilemmas we encountered as 'out-of-town' researchers endeavouring to utilise methodologies that address issues of cross-cultural research and the power relations endemic within.

Worth noting, at least in passing, is the complexity of our own positions within this study. That is, while one of the authors, Von, is Indigenous, she is not from the Aboriginal community involved in this project, although she maintains friendships with members of that community. The other author, Andrea, is not Indigenous and not Australian-born. Thus, cross-cultural collaboration in this research project was a feature not only between the Aboriginal community and ourselves, but also between ourselves. This element has required us to think about other key issues around 'insider'–'outsider' status – some of which we have only begun to explore. Each researcher brought a different approach to the research process, partly as a result of

different cultural backgrounds and partly because of different work experiences. Whilst both researchers have been teachers, Andrea has worked in a university setting for some time and has research experience while Von has only recently emerged from primary classroom teaching and she brought with her a more school-based as well as an Indigenous approach to discussions with parents and community members. These differences complemented rather than contradicted each other and in any case were subsumed by the desire of both researchers to develop a process that, as much as possible given time constraints, would give ownership of the process and the product to the communities whose knowledge we were collecting and developing.

### **Context of the study**

The continuous production of reports documenting the extent to which Indigenous peoples are disadvantaged by western education, and solutions that promise more of the same done better, prompted us to seek funding for a research project that would record solutions sought by the local Indigenous community and result in some kind of action being taken, with that action being designed and initiated by the Aboriginal community and by the local school.

A primary aim of the initial stage 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, we consulted a number of services that were resident and/or active, or have recently been active, in the area, including Family and Youth Services (FAYS), Centrelink, ATSIIC-funded services, the Community Development Employment Program (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.

Through the use of community consultation processes, we sought to explore the ways that relations of power within the remote community might become more productive for all people concerned with educational processes. Listening to various groups was a key strategy, noting Leonard's argument for the necessity to

listen first, to glimpse the overwhelming pain which cultural loss brings and to remember that it was the modern responsibility to act which led to the cultural losses in the first place. We may act if the Other wishes us to, and on their terms, but only after reflection, trying to relax the imperative to organize and classify with our plans and projects. (Leonard 1997, pp. 152–3)

We sought to listen closely to the different groups' responses to three key questions. Each of the groups was asked to speak about: a) what they thought worked to keep Aboriginal children and young people involved in school (ie, 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 (ie, what are your concerns about current practices?); and c) ideas for improving the educational opportunities for Indigenous children and young people within the local community.

Below, we discuss some of the theoretical frameworks that informed our research process; consider methodological issues and dilemmas that arose in and through this process; and then discuss the implications of these for further research in and with Indigenous communities.

## **Theoretical and policy frameworks**

The research design was informed by a number of research and policy documents that explore why western education is failing Indigenous children, particularly those in remote communities (see, for example, Woollorton 1997). Aboriginal people continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged adult and student groups in Australia. The Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs' *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000–2004* (2000), for example, notes that national testing results for 1999 showed that more than 80 per cent of Indigenous students failed to meet the identified performance criteria in reading. On average, Indigenous students miss up to one day of schooling every week, compared to around just three days every term for other Australian students, and 18 per cent of Australia's 'at risk' students are Indigenous.

That schooling is experienced as intrusive and oppressive by Indigenous young people is reported in a range of research (eg, Colman-Dimon 2000, Smith 1999, Morgan and Slade 1998). All of the foregoing writers suggest that the assimilationist nature of the education system contributes to low attendance rates and lower achievement rates of Indigenous students at school. Woollorton (1997, p. 42), for instance, attributes the lower educational standards achieved by Indigenous students in Western Australia to the assimilatory nature of education in that state. Guider (1991, p. 44) suggests that historically 'educational programs and policies have done little to address the lack of equality of opportunity for Aboriginal students in schools'. He further suggests, following Folds (1987), that the resultant failure of Indigenous students is an act of 'political resistance' to assimilationist schooling. Partington (1991) sees the education system as unable or unwilling to cope with cultural difference and, whilst having the potential to empower, as in fact strongly assimilationist and made

up of institutions in which Aboriginal students will be forced to 'trade their heritage for educational success' (Partington 1991, p. v).

The World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education produced *The Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education* (1999). This document succinctly states:

Volumes of studies, research and reports dealing with Indigenous people in non-Indigenous education systems paint a familiar picture of failure and despair. When measured in non-Indigenous terms, the educational outcomes of Indigenous people are still far below that of non-Indigenous people. This fact exists not because Indigenous people are less intelligent, but because educational theories and practices have been developed and controlled by non-Indigenous people. Thus, in more recent times, due to the involvement of Indigenous people, research shows that failure is indeed present, but that this failure is that of the system, not of Indigenous people. (1999, p. 56)

*The Coolangatta Statement*, by bringing together and emphasising both the educational rights of Indigenous peoples and the right to be Indigenous, brings to notice the colonising nature of the education system generally and the teaching practices that are systemically structured. The focus of *The Coolangatta Statement* is the right to self-determination. Principles of self-determination also informed our research.

*The Collaborative Action Plan 1997–2002* (MCEETYA 1996), which grew out of *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996–2000* (MCEETYA 1995), prioritised strategies to do with self-determination in education for Indigenous peoples. Those that had particular significance for us were:

- Establish processes and practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to contribute to all phases of school policy and development reviews and to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples contribute to all phases of school curriculum design, development and review (1.2.1.s; 1.4.1.s).
- Ensure schools negotiate to include the aims and initiatives of ASSPA [Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association] committees and other relevant Indigenous groups in school development plans and to provide training and materials for such committees.

Additionally, one of the recommendations of a report by Burke et al. (2000) was that schools' curricula should be developed in conjunction with parents and community members, with the local Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA)

Committee having a meaningful role. As well, Burke et al. (2000) suggested that curricula should focus on developing literacy and numeracy and be relevant to the pupils by taking account of local environment and culture, including Indigenous language. Successful implementation of these recommendations requires considerable input by local Indigenous communities and a role in the school's decision-making processes, particularly in relation to curriculum development.

Other key educational documents, including the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education's *Emerging Themes* (2000), and *Learning Lessons: An Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Northern Territory Department of Education 1999), suggest that Indigenous people have become alienated from the school system and that the Aboriginal 'voice' needs to be heard in the education of Indigenous children.

Smith, speaking to the importance of Aboriginal voice in educational research, notes:

In contemporary indigenous contexts there are some major research issues which continue to be debated quite vigorously. These can be summarized best by the critical questions that communities and indigenous activists often ask, in a variety of ways: Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will the results be disseminated? (Smith 1999, pp. 9–10)

In an attempt to deal with questions such as these and aware of generic power relations between 'researcher' and 'researched', as well as our own positions as 'outsiders' to this particular community, we considered a number of approaches including that of action research, collaborative research and dialogic research. These methodologies have been advocated in a variety of ways by researchers such as Gitlin (1990), Fairclough (1992), Fine (1994) and Mojee (2000). Because these approaches require researchers to begin with the community to identify issues of concern and to then work at the local level to design and trial solutions, these methodologies seemed to provide some starting points for our project.

'Research as dialogue' was a particular model developed by Theis (1987) for research that she did in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and that we found insightful. For Theis the practice of research as dialogue involved preparatory discussions with the communities being researched so that they could make some input into the way the research was structured. This is consistent with Gitlin's definition of a dialogic approach in which 'researchers must engage in dialogue with

practitioners at both the level of question posing and the interpretation of the findings' (Gitlin 1990, p. 446). In Theis' work, initial consultations with relevant Indigenous community groups resulted in the drafting and circulating of research proposals and their adoption after further discussion. Such an approach gives the community at least partial ownership of the research project and makes seeking permission from the community for the research to go ahead far more meaningful.

Theis also had the funding to employ a translator/interpreter and temporary research assistants from the various communities in which she worked. As well, she and her research group set up a steering committee made up of representatives from local Indigenous organisations with an interest in the study area. Her other research tools included attendance at community meetings to gather information about educational issues of concern to particular communities. Based on this information gathering, she conducted semi-structured individual interviews. Theis spent comparatively long periods of time in the community with a final field trip for her researchers of eight weeks.

Thus, action research and 'research as dialogue' are methodologies that influenced the way that we conceptualised our project. However, funding constraints ensured that we adapted from rather than fully utilised the principles of either approach. One of the criteria we could not meet was the time spent on site. Indeed, adapting 'research as dialogue' to our level of funding meant leaving out much of what Theis did and redesigning elements consistent with the productive relations of power between researcher and researched that we saw as informing Theis' model and that were central to our project. For example, we were able to establish links with the Aboriginal community through family and friendship relationships. We did establish a reference committee and maintained contact over the duration of stage one of our project with key Aboriginal educators and community members through three site visits, email, phone calls and newsletters.

Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser (2002) have written about problems associated with both collaborative research and research as dialogue. Debriefing of the collaborating team was an important element of their process. It was also of ours. However, our debriefing sessions were neither as extensive, nor as problematic as that reported by Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser. As much as we would have liked to include all research participants in the debriefing process, particularly the Indigenous community, funding and time constraints made this impossible. So debriefing after focus groups and interviews was confined to the two researchers. During the course of the data collection stage of this project, we were very much in a 'thinking and talking through' stage. Although we were informed by theories and methodologies that saw research as encouraging 'self- and social understanding and change-

enhancing action' (Lather 1991, p. 23), nevertheless on occasions we fell back on conservative research approaches when time did not allow us to involve participants in the negotiating or debriefing processes we desired.

Nevertheless, two considerations were paramount in our construction of the research methodology. One was that of collective ownership, an awareness that the knowledge collected was the intellectual property of the people being researched. This issue is particularly important in research with Indigenous communities. The other consideration, borrowed from Freire, was the extent that research (and in this case our research) could be acted on by the communities with whom we consulted. Freire's theorising in relation to education suggests that involvement in the process can produce a co-operative approach that accepts the 'interchangeability and mutuality' (Heaney 1995, p. 10) of the participants in the research. Further, it addresses the development of what Freire would refer to as a critical consciousness that is a precursor to action.

## **Methodology**

The consultations that formed the first stage of this project took place over three school terms in 2001. Focus groups as well as discussions with individuals were utilised for the collaborative consultations. These discussions took place during two visits to the remote community of five days each, one in February and one in March 2001. Data was collected through conversations with:

- Indigenous parents and key community representatives from the Indigenous community;
- teachers, Aboriginal education workers and administrators from the school;
- Indigenous students in school;
- key personnel from agencies, including Family and Youth Services (FAYS), TAFE and the local town council.

Discussions were either audiotaped and/or extensively noted. Discussions began with the guiding questions already noted but these were used as starting points only and the conversations that followed were then largely unstructured. Analysis of the taped focus group discussions and field notes used grounded research theory (Lincoln and Guba 1985) in order to identify key themes and issues that emerged in the consultations.

On the basis of these conversations, an interim report was written and distributed to all participants. In July 2001, we returned to the remote community for another five days to discuss the interim report, to further clarify our understandings and to give

participants an opportunity to respond and give us feed back on the report. In light of these discussions, a final report on stage one of the project, including recommendations for possible future projects, was produced and circulated to all key people involved in the earlier processes.

## **On matters of access and representation**

In our discussions with various members of the Aboriginal community, some solutions to the early exiting of their children from school were articulated quite forcefully while other ideas were germinating but became more solid through discussion. Part of our research project was to collect the ideas of the community, some of which we anticipated would be scattered and not fully formed, and to help formulate them through discussion and documentation. What we were seeking to do was to collect the *knowledge* of the community on this particular issue, that is, how to continue the education of young people who had rejected formal schooling, and in turn, reflect on and offer that knowledge back to the community in a way that was of use to them.

A number of both practical and methodological problems arose out of this intention. Firstly, there were several different language groups that made up the local Aboriginal community. As well, there were a number of prominent families who needed to be consulted and there was also wide disparity between the social and economic status of the different groups. This amalgamation of different families into 'one' community setting is in part a result of the forced relocation of Aboriginal groups from their traditional homelands into centralised mission stations, a historical pattern that was enforced by early European administrators and missionaries and which has had long-term, debilitating results for Aboriginal people. It was misleading, therefore, to see this community as unified and homogenous.

The need to recognise this diversity within the community was emphasised by various community members as well as a number of teachers in our conversations with them. For example, the wide social and economic differences among the Indigenous families in turn created different needs and expectations of what educational contexts can or should offer to the children. For some parents, their children's access to the dominant knowledge/power constructs through education was viewed as necessary in order to open up different life choices.

Alternately, there were other families in the community who, as Grant (2001, p. 97) suggests, were not part of the 'culture of power', and who were unable or chose not to provide their children with knowledge about the behaviours and disciplines that are needed to survive at school. A problem associated with this resistance to being socialised into the dominant culture is that other functions of schooling, including the

educational function, are refused as well. What this amounts to is that, if Indigenous students resist the enculturation that the school offers and indeed requires, then access to meaningful education is also denied them.

Given the focus of our project, meeting and speaking to those young people who had already exited school or to their families was an initial priority. However, because these young people were not attached to any institution, they were the least accessible. This applies generally in research situations when those involved in some kind of organisation are more easily accessible and therefore more likely to have their ideas heard and/or taken up through the research process. Those who are the most marginalised, and least attached to social institutions, are therefore least likely to have their perspectives recorded, despite the need for their viewpoints to be taken into account, particularly in a project such as this. Despite a number of different attempts to engage with the young people who had already left school, we were unsuccessful. We had to rely on the perspectives of particular adults in the Aboriginal community rather than the young people's views. This resulted in a serious omission in our data.

Additionally, for us to become familiar with the complex relationships and the different groups within the Aboriginal community required time to attend meetings, listen to a variety of people talking in different situations and just generally to 'hang out' in the community and with community members. Gaining knowledge of the protocol that was specific to this community was difficult. While we started from a model of 'research as dialogue', we found that access to different groups within the Aboriginal community with whom we could converse was in part determined by the limited time and funds we had to expend on the project and also by our own outsider status.

## **Issues of power relations**

Central to our research was the examination of power relationships that existed between various groups in the Indigenous community and the area school. We saw our research as intervening to strengthen the power of the Indigenous community to have a say in the education of their children vis-a-vis the school.

By structuring our research as discussions rather than formal interviews we tried to involve the parents, to enable them to feel an ownership of the aims of the project. To a limited extent this happened – and not always in ways that we might have predicted. For example, when speaking with a small group of women, we found that the focus of our discussion was changed by the group. As noted earlier, one of our focuses was the kinds of educational activities that the community could devise and implement that would involve out-of-school kids in some aspects of literacy and

numeracy and so keep them in touch with formal education. For this particular group of parents, however, this discussion was peripheral to their concerns. Their kids were in school. Their concern was how to get the school personnel to listen to them as parents, to improve the educational outcomes for their kids and to strengthen their participation in the educational decision making of the school as it affected their sons and daughters. This particular group were not interested in suggesting or discussing activities for out-of-school young people. For them, from their own perspective, a particular concern was the Aboriginal Student Support Parent Awareness Committee (ASSPA) and the way staff of the school 'took over' the running of monthly meetings, set the agendas and allocated the ASSPA funds using the committee, of which these women were members, to rubber stamp decisions already made within the school.

Through discussing this issue with us, this focus group of women was able to clarify their ideas, receive feedback and confirmation from us as outsiders, gain information about the experiences of other ASSPA committees in different areas and about reports that have been done on the function and functioning of ASSPA committees in other schools. In this way this group was theorising from their experiences, drawing on new information and constructing knowledge that was useful to them. Thus, in a research situation in which there was the potential for them to become the objects of research, through the processes of 'research as dialogue', they were able to transform themselves into subjects – and to redirect our focus to better suit their own aims.

Freire (1970) has an analysis of this kind of self-empowering action. He describes empowering action as integration with one's context rather than an adaptation to it. Freire calls integration 'a distinctively human activity' (1970, p. 4), the critical ability to make choices and to transform reality. The integrated person, in Freire's terms, is subject, and the adaptive person is object. The problem for educational researchers in projects such as this is how to construct research so that all participants are subjects and as such owners and co-constructors of research knowledge. The women in this particular focus group taught us what it means to take control of the research question, to integrate rather than adapt to our agenda. In doing so, they exercised a collective form of power.

The phrase 'community empowerment' is an important part of the title of our project, suggestive of the methodology we were using. However, the concept of empowerment is problematic as various meanings have been assigned to it. Gore (1993, p. 121) describes some of these common usages of the term:

'em-power-ment' implies (1) a notion of power-as-property (to empower is to give, confer), (2) an agent of empowerment (someone or something to do the empowering), and (3) a vision or desired end

state (a state of *empowerment*). From this perspective the theorist and/or teacher is viewed as the one who 'has the power' to be 'given' to readers/students. Hence, a great deal of agency is attributed to the theorist/teacher. In this view, the liberatory theorist/teacher is assumed not to oppress or repress by virtue of his or her liberatory intent. Furthermore, the theorist/teacher is assumed to know what is empowering, and, in such capacity, is thus positioned as the constructor and conveyer of truth.

While we acknowledge the diverse usages of 'empowerment' as outlined by Gore, we would also suggest that the different meanings of the term are not so easily separated or defined outside of specific contexts. Nevertheless, through the research design we endeavoured to grapple with the 'dangers' (Gore 1993, p. 122) that stem from discourses of 'empowerment'. We sought to avoid constructing ourselves as 'liberatory' researchers who already knew what would be empowering for the community by making community concerns a starting point for our project. Neither did we view 'power' as a possession that could be redistributed more equitably by ourselves as well-intentioned researchers – although perhaps it is fair to say there were times that we wished this was so! However, our thinking about our methodology also led us to accept concepts of empowerment as collective and related to communal action. Our view, in terms of this particular piece of research and indeed research generally, is that researchers should see themselves as agents enabling the interests of the communities they are researching. When or if subjects are able to make the research suit their own purposes, then they have empowered themselves. We saw 'empowerment of the community' in relation to education as a desirable end and ourselves and our research project as tools to achieve that end. To a certain extent then we concurred with Popkewitz, who makes the salient point that:

Discussion about empowerment and 'voice' in education focus on the problem of how to include those people who have been previously marginalized and excluded. These political projects of inclusion are important in a society that categorically has excluded different groups of people. But the focus on the categorical exclusion of groups does not answer the question about the systems of reasoning that organize the practices of 'success', 'empowerment', 'voice'. (1998, pp. 4–5)

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse what Popkewitz refers to as the 'systems of reasoning' that work to exclude Aboriginal students from education, although we acknowledge that such work remains to be done. Rather here we seek to highlight some of the methodological dilemmas set in play by our attempts to work with various 'voices' within the community as the first step towards empowerment.

## Different standpoints

As already mentioned, we were researching not one but several different communities, that is, the different groups within the Indigenous community; the school staff (predominantly non-Indigenous); and the various service providers, all of whom interacted with each other in a variety of ways but all of whom, in many ways, were also separate entities. Amongst the different groups we spoke to, there were clearly different and some times conflicting ways of making sense of why Aboriginal students were leaving the school. For example, one of the issues that emerged in discussions with Aboriginal students who were still at school was the high level of racism that these students experienced, and their beliefs that teachers themselves were powerless to stop it. By opening up a dialogue with the students, we enabled them to speak about some aspects of schooling that 'shamed' them. About this, students said:

They [other students] write things like – about black people in the toilets.

Yeah, like 'blacks suck'.

They write 'KKK' all over the –

*Interviewer:*

Do they?

Yep.

Yes.

And they try and act like them (the KKK) too.

They try to act but they don't prove it.

They don't prove that they are like them.

*Interviewer:*

No. They don't. Do they try to find out who's doing that stuff?

We know who's doing it.

*Interviewer:*

You know who's doing it?

Yeah.

*Interviewer:*

Do you tell the school?

No.

*Interviewer:*

Why not?

We keep it to ourself.  
Teachers don't even listen.

*Interviewer:*

Why don't you just –  
Yeah, they don't listen.  
They just – oh no, [they] wouldn't get them.

*Interviewer:*

So you keep it to yourselves. Why don't you tell the teachers?  
They won't do nothing. They'll do something after something happens.  
. . .

*Interviewer:*

So do you feel that? If you knew who was writing KKK on the walls  
would you tell the teacher?

Yes.

*Interviewer:*

You would?  
But they wouldn't really do much because they can't.  
Yeah, [gives name] will smash them.  
Because they're scared theirself – must be.

In contrast to the viewpoints of these students, a number of teachers argued that racism within the school community was not 'normally' an issue. One teacher, for example, commented:

I would have to say the Aboriginal kids definitely aren't discriminated against by the staff, or school policies. The kids only ever – there is only ever real noticeable stuff happening when another issue triggers it. If, for example, Fred kicked Jimmy and then some of Jimmy's friends come in, then it seems to split on race lines. But it doesn't happen normally . . . A lot of our bad feeling comes like that from the home, a lot of the disharmony comes from the home or what happens outside the school and is brought into the classroom.

Clearly, there are different perspectives represented here – ones that reflect the differential power positions available to teachers and to Indigenous students. That the students believed the teachers were either indifferent or unable to assist them when they experienced racism is not a point of view shared by the teacher quoted above.

Instead, rather than recognising that for many Indigenous students school itself was a context for inequitable relations of power, she endorsed the (widespread) belief that any problems that occurred were due to the home life of students – and therefore were outside her sphere of influence.

As researchers, we saw ‘mapping’ how the issues and problems were perceived from a wide range of perspectives as an important aspect of the project. We believed that including the voices of those who felt silenced or devalued because of structural relations of power – for example those of the Indigenous students – was a means to offer new insights and through these to draft new, more collaborative solutions to recurring problems.

Nevertheless, criticisms concerning the perspectives that we included within the interim report, such as the above students’ comments, were made by a number of the school staff in our follow-up discussions with them during our third site visit. When we met with them to seek their responses to the report, some members of staff expressed the view that the interim report was ‘heavily slanted with views from outside’ the school, and that many of the parental responses reflected the Indigenous community members’ own unhappy experiences with education. Some staff members also suggested that experiences of ‘shaming’ that students spoke about were exaggerated or that students did not understand the underlying reasons for particular practices.

We noted this critique in our final report. However, the purpose of the study was to investigate reasons for the early exiting of Aboriginal students and to report the ideas and concerns of all key stakeholders, not with the aim of ‘laying blame’ but with the intention of providing a means for all to express their concerns and to provide critical information that could aid in addressing the problem. Therefore, while we acknowledged the school staff concerns, we believed that it was essential to report on how each group perceived the issues from their often very diverse points of view.

The title of our research could suggest that bias was built into the research in favour of the perspectives within the Indigenous community. We argue that having, acknowledging and making transparent a *standpoint* need not result in uncritical or biased reporting. Part of our standpoint, as suggested in the project title, was that of viewing research as a strategy for social change.

However, the staff critique did raise questions for us about our own roles as researchers and the processes of research for social change, and highlighted some of the dilemmas raised by Smith (1999), as mentioned earlier: for example, ‘Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it?’

Declaring a 'standpoint' did not in itself resolve the tensions that emerged from the diverse perspectives, nor did it necessarily work to challenge the current unequal relations of power that existed between Aboriginal parents, students and school staff.

Including the diverse 'voices' of those who are positioned as less powerful through the structures and discursive practices within the school is only a means to an end. We found it insightful that students not only viewed themselves but also their teachers as powerless in the face of blatant racism. By making overt the perspectives of these students, we sought to draw attention to an area that needed to be addressed. Whether the students' reading of the situation was correct, that teachers too were silenced by, or at a loss as to how to deal with, racist threats was unclear – and indeed not the point. That they *believed* it to be true and therefore did not bother to seek help suggested to us an area that required attention. However, as noted, a number of school staff rejected this perspective and in turn this meant that inequitable power relations remained unacknowledged and unaddressed. This remains an ongoing problem.

Another participant in the project, an Indigenous community leader, saw the problem in a somewhat different light. He said:

certainly the school's got something there but it comes back to access to it. It comes back to, you know, to the trust. Whoever is in charge, whether the school council or – [they] still don't trust Aboriginal people . . . Unfortunately I say that the management in those organisations, unfortunately they just don't trust Aboriginal people and it comes back to – what I'm saying is that no matter what category or level of experience you are or what category or holder you are in the community, you're just not trusted. You're not trusted and you're seen as not being reliable. . . It's that mistrust.

Such a level of 'mistrust' on the part of some of the teachers appears to extend to denying the perspectives of the Aboriginal students. This in turn, as the Indigenous leader went on to explain, means that:

The school offends a lot of the young kids. For some reason they don't want to go back again. Some of them love going to school . . . but the thing is that once you offend somebody and if they're not feeling welcome or comfortable, you're never going to get them back there again.

Thus, even when alternative voices and Aboriginal perspectives are made overt, relations of power do not necessarily change. As Popkevitz (1998, p. 12) notes, a

more thorough reading of the 'systems of reasoning' that construct teachers' and other community groups' notions of inclusion–exclusion may be a means to 'open a potential space for alternatives', different ways of interacting that are not based on mistrust, denial and refusal to acknowledge injustice.

## Discussion

From the above, we see three closely related issues that emerge from our work on this project: firstly the way funding constructs and constrains research for social change; secondly, the ways in which knowledge/power relations are shaped through the design and implementation of the project; thirdly, our own positioning as researchers in relation to different groups of participants.

Funding constraints and the resultant limitations placed on time that can be spent on a research site actually constructs the research and confines the methodology to a very conservative and orthodox way of interacting with the research participants. As already mentioned, more time spent in/with the Indigenous community would have enabled us to engage with those members who were less easily accessible. More time would also have allowed us to present, discuss and further explore with community members the 'findings' of the project, in order to debrief, help clarify and move into the second stage. 'Research as dialogue' (Theis 1987) aims to enable a diversity of Indigenous voices not only to be 'heard' but to be influential in shaping the design and outcomes of research that will be useful to the local community. However, the current processes of gaining funding for research projects act as a 'catch-22'. That is, before funding is granted, there needs to be an identified methodology, with the significance of the project and intended outcomes already well argued. Requisite consultative processes are thus pre-empted in order to gain the funding to begin this process.

Additionally, on the basis of our experiences, for non-Indigenous researchers and Indigenous researchers not of the language group being researched, it would not only be courteous but indeed necessary to have an interpreter so that people involved in the research can have a choice of language. In any case, whether Indigenous languages are spoken or not, we strongly argue that in projects that involve Indigenous communities it should be mandatory to include funding for an Indigenous person from the area being researched to be employed as a liaison person and as a research assistant. This would involve a very useful exchange of knowledge and skills and would also provide a far more comfortable entry into the community by 'out-of-town' researchers.

What became patently obvious to us doing this research was the way centralised, structured and controlled funding perpetuates the great divide between researchers and researched. Whether or not the research is socially useful, to what extent it involves the community being researched as co-researchers or provides opportunities for communities (particularly Indigenous communities) to set the research agenda appears to be irrelevant to funding bodies. To communicate our findings to the community and involve the community in constructing knowledge based on those findings required time and money we did not have. We recognise that most researchers would argue that more funding would allow more time on the project and therefore better research outcomes. However, we believe that when researching with Indigenous communities more funding is essential in order to 'decolonise [the] methodologies' (Smith 1999), that is, to move outside the western paradigm, to investigate new ways of constructing and engaging in research with Indigenous communities that recognises different, cross-cultural communication structures.

In thinking through these issues, we found the work of Smith (1999) particularly useful. She cites four models of research developed by Graham Smith for non-Indigenous and non-resident Indigenous researchers, when working with Indigenous communities. A 'tiaki model' has key Indigenous people guide and sponsor the research and mentor the researcher; the 'whangai model' is one in which the researchers are incorporated into the daily life of the people being researched; a third model involves power sharing and the participation of the researched in the whole of the research project; and a fourth model Smith refers to as 'an empowering outcomes model'.

Our research probably comes closest to this fourth category in that the intent of the research was to engage in dialogue with the Indigenous community and together to find ways that they could intervene in the education of their children. Our design was an attempt to put 'research as dialogue' into practice. From our point of view, this worked well in several instances. For example, the exchange of information between Von and the local ASSPA parent committee was an example of how, through participating in the research, these women's ideas and concerns about their children's education, and in particular their troubled relationship with the school, were acknowledged and affirmed. Von offered explicit advice on how they could better address the unequal relations of power between the school and the ASSPA committee. In turn, we as researchers gained invaluable insights into current relations of power that we would not otherwise have been able to access. At the invitation of the women, we attended an ASSPA committee. This exchange of views gave us much better insight into the silencing of the parents that was occurring and enabled us also to begin to understand why young people chose to leave the school from an early age. Thus knowledge was socially constructed as a two-way conversation between researchers and participants.

Nevertheless, we as the ‘outside’ researchers designed the first stage of the project, including the starting questions for the consultations; we also wrote the interim and final reports for stage one. In doing so, we selected the aspects of the consultations that we found most relevant to the concerns of the research. We recognise that we as researchers constructed meanings and made recommendations on our own interpretations of what the various groups saw as important. Even with the best of intentions, what we presented in our report of the project is still a re-presentation and a reconfiguration of the many ideas of the people we spoke with during this project.

Finally, this leads into a third issue that emerged for us: that of our relationships as researchers to the different groups within the community. While we sought more socially just educational outcomes for the Indigenous students, we also had to confront the question: ‘How powerful is the researcher in bringing about social change?’ From our experience of this project, we realise that the researchers’ role may be confined to providing a knowledge base from which the wider community itself can develop strategies for change. While some of the recommendations of the interim report have been taken up by the school, the research project per se did not challenge the status quo of current power relations within this remote community. This is why it becomes crucial for the Indigenous community to be involved in all aspects of the research process, in all stages, in order to ‘own’ the outcomes and feel able to act on them. We believe that only through active partnerships between researchers and the local community and local, contextualised ownership of research processes can more socially just outcomes be achieved.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Australian Association of Research in Education National Conference, Fremantle, Western Australia, 2–6 December 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> This project, undertaken by the authors when both were Senior Research Fellows at the Aboriginal Research Institute, University of South Australia was funded through a small internal grant from the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences.
- <sup>3</sup> The specific region is not identified in this paper for reasons of confidentiality. However, we believe the issues presented here have applicability to other projects that seek to work with Indigenous communities.

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