

## **Educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Kids: The Karama Way**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this booklet is to outline for the benefit of the Karama School staff, the major issues involving the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at this school and how we as a staff respond to these.

Rather than being a blueprint for all schools, it is a statement of our response, our reactions and our attitudes to the Indigenous group at this school. It should be seen as an evolutionary process with consequential change as issues change; as there is a change of background of the children and as staff grow more tolerant, more understanding and more compassionate. As educators at this school, we cannot be judgmental. We need to be proactive. Above all we need to be sensitive as well as sensible in our approach.

Finally, the will to succeed must drive us. We have had great success. There are many more successes to be had. This booklet is in response to many enquiries and comments about these successes. It is also to be seen as a guide to build on what we've done, with a view to doing better. It is with a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction that I present it to you.

Bob Hale  
Principal, Karama School  
26 May 2000.

## What is an Aboriginal Person?

How often do we hear the statement: "He/she is as white as I am yet he/she claims to be an Aboriginal person"?

Such a statement denies the basic right of any person to identify with a particular group to which he/she sees himself/herself as having some affiliation or kinship. In addition it is entirely subjective on the part of the person making the statement and betrays a personal appraisal of another's family situation. Invariably there are connections which are real and are critically important to the Aboriginal person. There will also be an historical perspective which will support the person's decision. Aboriginality is not based on pigmentation of the skin. It is based on family (in the broadest sense), and attitudes towards oneself and others in the group.

### *Our Response*

How do we as teachers at Karama School determine who is and who is not of Aboriginal background? The answer is simple. We don't. It is not our business. There are many issues involving Aboriginality where we need to avoid being judgemental. These include life style, attitudes to education, punctuality, ASSPA Committees, Homework Centres and schools in general. These will be covered in greater detail elsewhere. Suffice it to say here that, as teachers, we need to be careful that we give no pronouncements that may be construed as judgemental by the receiver of the opinion.

### *Points to Ponder*

- Family life is a precious and private business. With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children it is just the same. They feel, they hurt, they are sensitive. They are proud of their heritage and we must value and appreciate this as an enrichment to our school environment.
- Praise works wonders for all people. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children respond well to praise and there will be several times a day where praise will work positively for you as staff.
- There is a huge amount of love and affection in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Be aware of this. Sometimes it may not show up in a form expected by non-Indigenous people. However it is there and should be appreciated.
- The ASSPA Committee at this school makes regular donations of materials to the pre school and library. These are for the use of the school as a whole. The Committee is very supportive of our endeavour and is in regular contact with the principal in both a formal and informal way. The Homework Centre too enjoys a close relationship with the school.
- At public functions at Karama School, the Traditional Owners of the Land, the Larrakia Nation, are always recognised as a mark of respect.

## **Generalisation: the scourge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

One aspect that really irritates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the tendency by non-Indigenous people to generalise when dealing with people or issues. Just as in other groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons are as diverse as their backgrounds can allow. Children may come from one of the long-standing Darwin families. They may live in an extended family arrangement with one or other of the grandparents or a designated guardian. They may belong to a family that has moved from elsewhere into the greater Darwin area. They may be a community based family who is in Darwin for a definite reason, not always apparent to others. They

may or may not identify with traditional roots. They may use English as a first language or English may be a second or other language. The family may see itself, or be seen by others, as a traditional landowner. Other families may be visitors to this area and be seen in this context by themselves or other families. To lump them together as Aboriginal does no justice to the individual, be it the person or the family.

#### *Our Response*

- We need to look at each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child as an individual person. We must avoid placing the child in a compartment labelled Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander. To do this, by itself, stereotypes the child and can lead to false expectations,
- The idea that "This child is Aboriginal so there he/she will react in a set and pre-judged way" is wrong. It leads to attitudes to attendance, retention, doing homework, etc that do us little justice in dealing with the child or its family.

#### *Points to ponder*

- The overwhelming number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at this school use English as a first and only language. They also use certain words or sentence constructions that are Aboriginal English, for example, 'gammon'; 'too much people'; 'feeling shamed'. So too do many of the non-Indigenous children and, in many cases, so do their parents.
- If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at Karama School do have learning problems it will probably be for reasons other than that they use English as another language. So we must explore more deeply.
- Their family circumstances vary greatly. Many of the Karama families are related, often through a rather complicated network. We need to establish this relationship in our own minds. This is one of the areas where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are extremely useful.
- As teachers, we must win trust and support. It does not come automatically. However, when that trust is established, it is real not imagined. If an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child chooses to call you "uncle" or "auntie" or uses your whole name eg "John Smith", realise that this is an honour. It is not disrespectful and it should be treasured. It is equally true that teachers should not force a title of "uncle" or "auntie" on to themselves. To do this would be to expect a title that may not be appropriate in the eyes of the child.
- There will be times when there are tensions between and among Aboriginal and Islander families. These can be deep-seated, going back to past generations. We need to accept these tensions as a part of life and avoid trying to be judgemental. Compassion and understanding will always win in the long term.

#### **The Role of the Principal**

To a large extent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents relate to a person rather than a position. It is therefore critical for the principal to develop a relationship based on personal qualities of trust, compassion, understanding and tolerance, rather than those based on a position of class, status and authority.

Like quite a few others, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents have quite horrendous memories of principals, principal's offices and schools in general. These are prejudices that the principal must address if he/she are to have effective relations with parents. Quite often, if parents feel they need to see the principal, they go through quite a traumatic experience before they even get to the school.

To them the issue that they may wish to discuss is critical and the last thing they need is to be fobbed off. In their minds 'fobbing off' occurs through:

- interviews made difficult to schedule and conducted in an authoritarian manner
- use of education jargon which makes the parent feel inferior
- little or no follow up on the issue which led to the original concern, no change to the situation
- generalising or stereotyping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the part of the principal.

These lead to resentment and negativity on the part of the parent.

#### *Our Response*

- If an interview is sought, the principal tailors his day around the interview. He must make time from a busy schedule for the interview to give the parent the feeling that the issue is extremely important and in need of prompt attention.
- We avoid the use of the principal's office for interviews. The use of an office, which is a symbol of authority, can often be demoralising for the parent. Rather we use an interview room, the staff room facilities, or simply take a stroll around the grounds. Issues can be defused, parents' anger and aggression made to abate and rational discussion can ensue if the principal can be compassionate enough to place himself in the place of the parent and realise the degree of trauma involved and respond accordingly.
- At Karama we use everyday English in discussions. As individual persons, principals would avoid doctors who use words of 'learned length and thund'ring sound', so the same applies in the principal's dealing with parents.
- The Karama Principal must be a good listener. The issue for the parent is critical. The solution, at least from the principal's perspective may be quite simple, but let the solution evolve, and hear the problem out. We allow the parent the opportunity to terminate the interview when he/she is satisfied, rather than when time runs out.
- It is critical that the interview is followed up with a letter to show what action has been taken, or if no action is taken, the reasons for such a decision
- Above all, it is important to be sincere and genuine.

#### *Points to Ponder*

- In the eyes of many parents, and, in particular many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, the role of the principal is seen as remote, authoritarian, even all powerful. These are life's realisms, based on previous personal experience on the part of the parent. The principal at this school needs to reach out and go to the parents. This can be done in small ways - the interview strategies, stopping and talking about the good things kids do, making time to be approached and being relaxed.
- The children are the parent's children. The staff, and, in particular the principal are agents who from time to time are replaced. The commonality is the child and the family. The principal needs to be seen around the school and in the classrooms. He needs to know the children and convert the office of the principal to be a place of fun, affection and compassion.
- Comments, assertions or statements made by the principal are most often seen as gospel by many parents. Because of this it's a bit like throwing a rock into a pool. You can see where it enters the pool but you can't be sure where the ripples end. If a comment causes a lot of ripples it's virtually impossible to undo, be the consequences good or bad.
- The current principal seeks to avoid the use of "my" eg. **my** school, **my** staff, **my** teachers etc. It infers an ownership that is not there. It also implies an authority which defeats the warmth in relations when dealing with people particularly

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At Karama we replace "my" with "the".

- A lonely job can be kept lonely, or it can become rich and warm by gathering around the individual, persons who are friendly, appreciative and supportive. Only the principal himself can choose which direction he takes.
- Especially in dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, but in dealing with parents overall always bear in mind the words of Chief Dan George:

*What you do not know  
You will fear.  
What one fears, one destroys.*

### **The Front Office**

The first port of call for visitors, parents and supporters of the school is invariably the front office. It is there that lasting impressions are made. It is there that the tone, the warmth, or indeed the coolness of the school is judged. It is therefore of critical importance that the front office is staffed by caring and sensitive persons.

#### *Our Response*

- Front office staff have the primary role of making persons welcome, be they adults or children. They do not necessarily have all the answers at their fingertips, nor is it expected of them. What is expected, though, is an aura of friendship, happiness and contentment. For enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the AIEW is involved, right from the beginning, as they are with all matters of dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and children. The adage of sending parents away happy, smiling and with the information they seek is well practiced by the front office staff.
- The front office is seen as a place of refuge and solace by the children. Those who are sick, injured, need kindness and sympathy, need a shoulder to cry on or somebody to talk to come to the front office. Even children 'in trouble' are dealt with in the interview room or the office of the assistant principals. In this way matters can be discreetly dealt with, with a minimum of fuss and bother.
- The office of the principal, though the smaller of the two offices, has the advantage of having two doors, one internal and one external. This allows those who may be embarrassed to go through the usual protocols, to have access to the principal, direct and in private. This fact has not gone unnoticed by parents and many, and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents avail themselves of this alternative. The other office with 'two door' facilities is occupied by the AIEW for the same reasons.
- The Art work displayed in the front office has been specially chosen. Though it is of Aboriginal flavour, it was done at a school camp in 1999 by groups of year 6/7 children. That these children came from many diverse backgrounds is important in the context of the completed paintings. They are examples of our 'melting pot' approach to ethnicity, language groups and clan structure.

#### *Points to Ponder*

- If we believe, and we do, that the welfare of the children is the supreme law, then it behoves us to make the front office THE focal point of this welfare.
- Initial impressions are lasting ones. If visitors are welcomed, made to feel appreciated and have their enquiries dealt with promptly and with sensitivity, then chances are they will be positive in their responses about the school.

## The Role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff

Most schools in the urban regions of the Northern Territory boast a significant number of Indigenous children. It is true that certain schools have a higher percentage than others. This often occurs for reasons outside the control of the particular school. Karama School has a population of some 140 Indigenous students out of a total of just over 500. This group of Indigenous students constitutes a significant part of the school. It is true that we recognise the importance of this group. Therefore it is only fair and just that the staffing establishment reflects this distribution. It is much simpler for all concerned if there is inbuilt to the staffing situation, persons of various backgrounds. They are a very important source of information, sensitivity and, above all, can be seen as successful role models. In addition they can be the integral link between the school and the home. In relation to Indigenous staff, in many cases, they can give an insight, based on sensitivity, respect and cultural awareness, into the complexity of relationships between school and family.

### *Our Response*

- Karama School has an establishment of around 35 staff. This varies from time to time and includes part-time staff as well. Given the percentage of Indigenous students at around 25 percent, a staffing level of around 8 or 9 Indigenous persons is appropriate.
- This school has developed an initiative based on the benefits which accrue from placing Indigenous staff in critical areas. The position of AIEW is specially 'earmarked' and is filled by an Indigenous person. We have been successful in placing an Indigenous pre-school aide, a janitor as well as teachers (three in number). In addition three part-time Instructors are of Indigenous background. The initiative of increasing the teaching component to five or six is still being pursued.
- The importance of successful role models cannot be over emphasised. This is important not only to the children, but also the parents. At Karama the strategy has significantly contributed to increased attendance, and a closer and more harmonious relationship between the school and the Indigenous parents. This involvement is more informal than formal and it has been eminently successful. Tensions between school and home have virtually evaporated.
- The emergence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance group over the past three years has had a very positive effect. The group practises regularly and has been involved in major public presentations. On each occasion, the parents have taken the children to and from rehearsals and the main performance. In addition parent participation in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activities eg. ASSPA Committee has increased.
- The blending of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff has afforded Karama School a unique opportunity to develop into a multi-cultural, vibrant, tolerant and compassionate group. In all, eleven ethnic groups are represented on the staff — a reflection of the suburb's ethnic mix.

### *Points to Ponder*

- There is a richness of cultural diversity there to be tapped for the betterment and enrichment of the children at the school. It allows us to practise cross-cultural awareness on a daily basis. It allows us to practise the one statement of duty for all at this school — 'the educational, social and cultural enhancement of the children of the Karama School community.'

- Much has been done to develop an appropriate cross cultural awareness and ATTITUDE. More needs to be done. More can be done if there is a will to make it work. **The will, not the awareness, is the critical component.**
- In order to be understood, one needs to understand. The issues start with the individual.

### **The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children**

One of the enduring consequences of catering for the needs and aspirations of children in a multi-cultural school environment is the need to develop strategies to deal with the individual person, the individual group, and the collective groups with a view to having one socially homogeneous body.

Compartmentalising the groups should be avoided as it can lead to making excuses, generalisations, and prejudged assessments and assertions. All children have a right to the best efforts that the staff can give. All children are little boys and girls eager and willing to learn if the opportunity is there.

The critical issue in this regard is a feeling of belonging, a feeling of being appreciated and a feeling of being wanted. If all these components are filled, then children will learn and be worthwhile citizens.

#### *Our Response*

- Karama's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up a significant number of the student body. They come from the diverse backgrounds mentioned above. Some of our families, for reasons often not apparent, are ill-equipped to cope with the pressures they face. Some families have financial means sufficient to cope in today's society. Some children come from backgrounds where the family lives at or below the poverty line. At Karama we do not generalise, we do not prejudge and we do not make judgements.
- The AIEW and other Indigenous staff are a rich source of advice and assistance to other staff.
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff are strategically placed so as to maximise contact with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander parents (pre school, ECE, upper primary). Parents are aware of these points of contact and respond positively to them.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are treated no differently from other students. Expectations in relation to attendance and performance are high, and non-attendance and/or non-performance are relentlessly followed up. The AIEW is central to this process.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's attendance is monitored and calculated by the AIEW on each collection day and referred to the principal. He will explain particular requirements for absence, such as grieving processes or family arrangements, to individual staff members.
- Home visits are carried out as appropriate by AIEW and/or principal. Please refer relevant concerns to either.
- When setting project-type work please bear in mind the socio-economic background of all students. Research can be done at school or at the Karama Public Library. Do not expect support from some homes because of factors beyond our control. Do not set projects which could result in causing problems at home, especially on socio-economic or cultural grounds.
- When dealing with grieving processes or family arrangements, bear in mind that you should be culturally sensitive.

- Do not demand that children look at you when you are speaking to them. Some will, but some won't because of their cultural background. Those that won't are not being rude or offensive. Let it slide.
- Some children may not answer a simple question if they realise that you, as the teacher, know the answer already. This will be particularly so with community-based children. You may have to seek answers in a different way in order to get an answer.
- Be sensitive to issues in Study of Society and the Environment particularly where attitudes to land and the sea are concerned. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have an attitude which will differ from the one usually accepted by non-Indigenous persons. We need to respect this. A similar sensitivity should be used when issues such as 'stolen generations' and traditional ownership of land are involved.
- There will be times when some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children arrive late to school. We need to be mindful that they may have had to get themselves ready for school, and isn't it better for them to be a bit late than not to get to school at all? Staff should report persistently late children to either the principal or the AIEW.

### **Conclusion**

Karama School has much to celebrate in its approach to the education of Indigenous kids and its close relationship with their parents. We have

- an enviable attendance record
- given the children a feeling of belonging, being part of the school, being appreciated for what they are — kids who want to succeed
- excellent advice and assistance coming from Indigenous staff
- an improving literacy and numeracy rate and opportunities via the extension classes for the children to excel.

In this regard, let us make sure that we remember that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the upper extension class (for high achievers and independent workers) directly reflects the Indigenous composition of this school. A similar pattern is emerging with the Early Childhood extension class. In this regard the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can stand tall.

Staff can feel justly proud of their efforts. I hope that this handbook will be used to give you a further insight into how things are done here, why they are done in this way and why we have been successful.