INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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NEW SOUTH WALES

AECG

INCORPORATED

ABN 29 271 072 930

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find attached the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's submission to the Inquiry into Bullying of Children and Young People in NSW.

The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG) is acknowledged by the NSW Government as the peak advisory group on Aboriginal Education. The NSW AECG is a community based organisation made up of voluntary members from across the State.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely

Cindy Berwick
President
NSW AECG Inc.
21st April 2009

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Bullying is considered a serious issue for Aboriginal communities and families. Issues of race, colour, culture, language, gender, socio-economic status, and demographic location are all potential sites of discrimination and bullying. Before detailing these, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the brutal and often violent nature of colonization that continues today through more subtle, but no less harmless means such as institutional barriers and systemic processes fuelled by media hype, and a vocal, cynical and complacent minority in our society. While many of the issues arising from the impact of colonization have attempted to be addressed at many levels, Aboriginal people continue to be the most disadvantaged group in NSW (and Australia) as detailed in the NSW Government Senate Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (2008)[1].

Bullying can occur at an individual, institutional and/or on a multi-level basis at individuals, family groups and communities. As it centres on the notion of an imbalance of power[2], Aboriginal people and their communities are more vulnerable than most because of their lack of access to resources and power bases in wider society. Bullying can also be physical, verbal, psychological, social and sexual, and more recently, technical through cyber-bullying[3] and cannot be separated from the act of discrimination.

Bullying on the basis of race or ethnicity has a long history in Australia including overt misrepresentations of Aboriginal people in cartoons, media images, humour, government policies and documents, early school textbooks etc. More recently, racism tends to be covert, activated in more subtle ways such as low expectations of Aboriginal students in schools, setting up Aboriginal programs to fail through lack of resources and training, punishment that does not include the impact of racial taunts as the precursor for

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[1] *NSW Government Senate Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (2008)*
[2] *www.bullyingnoway.com.au*
[3] *www.bullyingnoway.com.au*

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aggressive reactions etc. *"These beliefs disempower and isolate individuals and groups and damage the social harmony of diverse and multicultural Australia."*[4].

Bullying on the basis of colour, while related to race is different in terms of how it is expressed and what it implies. For example an Aboriginal person can be discriminated on the basis of 'looking Aboriginal' or 'not looking Aboriginal enough' and therefore not being a 'real Aborigine'. All of these are equally damaging psychologically and emotionally and potentially lead to issues around identity formation and mental health.

Bullying on the basis of cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) is also experienced by young Aboriginal people and often focuses on misinterpretations and stereotypes about Aboriginal culture and their various language forms. For example, cultural traits such as obligations to family can be misinterpreted as nepotism, or 'sticking together' as if this is a bad or subversive thing to do. Other stereotypes are given cultural labels and attributed specifically to 'being Aboriginal' such as not having a job interpreted as not wanting a job and being lazy. Aboriginal English is at times targeted as a deficient language by students and teachers alike and corrected leaving the child ashamed of their language and therefore culture. Further, denial of culture and identity for any young person including an Aboriginal child can be intimidating and disempowering inflicting psychological harm in terms of identity and sense of belonging.

While bullying based on gender is across all cultures and communities, for Aboriginal people gender-based discrimination has historical roots. Aboriginal women have been stereotyped as promiscuous and have been sexual victims of dispossession on a large scale. Aboriginal men have also been victims of sex stereotyping as violent and drunk criminals who are more than likely to be wife beaters and child abusers; a stereotype heightened by the NT intervention. This contributes to the bigger picture of demonization and discrimination leading to bullying by individuals, organisations and institutions.

Many Aboriginal people can be bullied on the basis of their socio-economic status. Given the increasing number of Aboriginal people in this group and the increasing growth in the young Aboriginal population compared to the non-Aboriginal population, this issue is

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[4] *www.bullyingnoway.com.au*

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emerging more regularly. The already debilitating affects of poverty on a young person's quality of life, self esteem and sense of powerlessness leads to a loss of optimism for the future and is severely compounded if bullied about this aspect of their life. For young people born into this situation, opportunities to move out of a cycle of disadvantage are slim at best and the school is seen as the institution that can provide these opportunities. If the bullying occurs at the school then this becomes another source of perceived failure and, as little exists outside this system to support people into employment, all hope can be lost. This loss of hope has been identified in many health and welfare reports as a key contributor to mental illness and social dysfunction.

Some rural, isolated and other 'undesirable' locations such as housing commission estates, can be another source of bullying as many Aboriginal people live in these areas. In some cases it can be living on the 'mission' or 'on the other side of the river' that can be cause for denigration and intimidation, or in some cases cause for aggressive and bullying behaviour in itself. Many characteristics are attributed to people who live in these areas such as violence, crime, domestic dysfunction and these can be attributed to a young person whether or not it occurs in their lives. Given the history of Aboriginal people being dispossessed and/or relocated at the whim of governments or landowners, little control over living arrangements is common. This becomes not only another source of 'double' disadvantage but can contribute to the mental health and social issues already mentioned.

Of the types of bullying that occurs on young Aboriginal people, the most concerning are those that cause psychological and emotional harm that leads to mental health issues. Youth suicide is a growing concern and combined with family and community despair leading from past practices such as the Stolen Generations, this increases the vulnerability of young Aboriginal children to bullying. This issue was identified by schools in the Yamaji region of Western Australia. The "Solid kids, Solid Schools - Aboriginal Bullying Prevention Project" was implemented because of the " ... *serious mental health consequences of bullying, repeated exposure to bullying and racism in the school environment is a major contributor to poor academic performance and poor*

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retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students." (Howard 2002)[5]. This study further identifies the need for 'culturally secure responses' to get students to disclose the bullying and have confidence that it will be dealt with appropriately so it discontinues. Principals noted that Aboriginal students who were bullied were more withdrawn than their non-Aboriginal counterparts and that restorative justice strategies provided a greater sense of 'fairness' in dealing with the issue.

The notion of culturally secure responses' and the opportunity to experience 'fairness' or a sense of justice is an extremely important one for Aboriginal children. This implies significant involvement of Aboriginal advisors / liaison officers in the whole process of dealing with the issue.

Another program from Western Australia; 'Friendly Schools, Friendly Families' has generated considerable research with *'Interim results from the first year of study suggest(ing) that students who received one year of the intervention were significantly less likely to be bullied in every way, compared with students who did not receive the intervention.*"[6] It is important that programs like this be comprehensively assessed in terms of the NSW context to consider to possibility of implementation.

Obviously, prevention is the best approach and comprehensive and authentic education programs around Aboriginal histories, cultures and socio-political issues supported by culturally appropriate policies and procedures need to be systematically committed. The 'Bullying No Way'[7] website outlines a number of collaborative and reflective approaches that are applicable to Aboriginal as well as CALD young people. Access to sensitive and culturally appropriate mental health, counselling and other community services is important. Cross agency and holistic approaches involving family, community and significant people such as Elders should also take priority. Staff training at schools is another area that needs attention and should be included in a larger whole school and whole system approach to Aboriginal education.

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[5] Howard,D. (2002). *"Family, friends and teachers: Why Indigenous students stay at or leave school."* in The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 30(2), 8-12
[6] www.chpru.ecu.edu.au/research/completed/fsaf.php
[7] www.bullyingnoway.com.au

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The NSW AECG also acknowledges that bullying happens between Aboriginal people and within communities causing further instability and difficulty for Aboriginal children[8]. If there are also issues at the school level and this is not a safe place for children, then the consequences of bullying can be severe. Bullying can occur when new people come into the community, Aboriginal community members can be mocked for being 'too successful', not being 'black enough' or coming from 'that bad mob'. Bullying in communities occurs because of unresolved traumatic issues particularly intergenerational trauma, healing that needs to but hasn't occurred, and as part of a cycle of violence and disadvantage. Importantly, governments and their institutions still have the same responsibility to Aboriginal children and young people whether they are bullied by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and to ignore the issue because it occurs within communities is neglect. In saying this, schools and agencies need to be particularly sensitive to the issues and politics involved and seek extensive advise, consultation and support to help the young people involved. 'Top down' and punitive measures like the NT intervention exacerbate the issues and in some cases escalate the behaviour instead of modelling behaviours that empower all parties and seek genuine solution to the issues.

Communities can also be enlisted to address bullying within their own through strategies such as[9]:

- teaching youth about the issues from a young age

- holding community circles with victims and offenders in the same circle

- employing 'traditional'/'pre-contact' teachings or culturally acceptable approaches where appropriate

- sensitizing youth to others feelings, needs, etc

- leadership, individual and community capacity building

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[8]*Canadian Aboriginal Bullying Training Program*
[9] *Canadian Aboriginal Bullying Training Program*

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- empowering Elders in the community to hold a positive leadership role that is well resourced and supported

- providing opportunities for safe and confidential disclosure

- providing opportunities for safe return to a community.

These strategies would require a genuine commitment of resources and time as well as culturally appropriate consultation and protocols to ensure empowerment and sustainability.

Finally, bullying exists at every level and across every group in society and is embedded in a culture which, on an institutional level at least, is based on a hierarchical structure which relies on power and its distribution and use (and misuse) for its operation and survival. The power issue is the core of much bullying, discrimination, harassment and violence and until this issue is addressed at all levels, these problems will continue in the form of societal dysfunction which disempowers all members of society to varying degrees and shames Australia on an international level.

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