The courage to lead

Reculturing for wellbeing and learning through whole-school change

Myponga Primary School
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Abstract:
This paper outlines the way staff, students and parents have identified sources of social exclusion, fostered a more inclusive community, challenged accepted paradigms and embarked on our journey towards 'wellbeing and learning' at Myponga Primary School.

This is a story of re-culturing, of change from the inside out, of shifting perceptions, and of the letting go of old ways of thinking. It is a story about courage, as courage was required of all of us (staff, students and parents) as we began to take risks, to critically reflect on our individual and collective actions and beliefs, and to act innovatively to create a more educationally inclusive learning community.

Part 1: The principal's perspective
Jillian Jordan, principal

Setting the scene
Myponga Primary School is a small-to-medium school with approximately 160 students. The school is located alongside the Myponga Reservoir at the top of Sellicks Hill. While in the past the school was regarded fondly as a small rural community school, catering for the local farming and town families of this close-knit community, in recent years our enrolments have grown significantly and 75% of our students now come from the rapidly growing outer urban development strip along the southern coast, in particular from the suburbs of Sellicks Beach, Silversands and Aldinga.

Almost half of our students are school card holders; many more struggle daily with issues related to poverty and disadvantage, as parents earn just enough to be considered over the threshold and therefore ineligible for school card and the associated system supports that would subsequently apply. A number of families also live daily with the impact of compound disadvantage and this is reflected in a range of ways, including long-term unemployment, family dysfunction, drug and alcohol abuse, and gambling addiction.

Many of our families must also cope with issues of social/geographic isolation, as they live in an outer-urban area that lacks the essential social infrastructures that we take for granted in more highly developed metropolitan areas. For example, families cannot simply walk to a local deli—there isn't one in easy reach. There are extremely limited transport services, and an absence of local supermarkets, medical centres, play areas or community resources. As a result, it is difficult for many families to build and sustain positive social networks.

Three years ago, when we first began to explore ways to create a more socially inclusive school culture, teachers were particularly concerned by the way so much of the conflict that originated out of school hours and in the local community spilled over into the school yard and into classrooms.

In term 2 of 2002, a student survey revealed that as many as 80% of our students 'did not like school' and many considered that the best time of the school day was lunch time or when the home bell rang. Students also told us that they preferred to sort out conflict themselves rather than seek help because teachers were difficult to find in the yard and, even if students could manage to find and speak to a teacher, they felt little was done to resolve the problems effectively. This may not have always been the case, but it was the students' perception at the time. Our behaviour data also revealed that many of our students saw school more as a 'social' place than as a 'learning' place and, since social interactions were dominated by conflict and bullying, there was little energy left over for on-task learning, participation and engagement in classroom programs. In addition, teachers expressed frustration that so much time was spent trying to deal with harassment and bullying, particularly after recess and lunch breaks when children often came back into class unsettled and angry.

It was clear that in order for our students to engage positively and fully in their learning, we first needed to attend to their wellbeing. The immediate challenge was to rethink and rebuild the learning culture by creating a place in which all our students:

- were treated respectfully at all times
- felt safe and valued
- grew increasingly in self confidence, resilience and optimism
- contributed actively in the development of their own learning
- contributed strongly in the successes and achievements of others
- had a conscious sense of belonging and a connectedness with the community
- enjoyed quality relationships with and trust in their teachers and peers
- had a range of personal skills for resolving issues respectfully
- believed that adults acted fairly and positively when dealing with issues and conflict
- believed that the learning they participated in was meaningful, challenging and relevant.

In essence, this concept of *wellbeing* became our starting point for 'reculturing' through a process of whole-school change. A focus on wellbeing underpinned our goal of developing a better understanding of social inclusion and how it can work to build optimism, resilience and personal responsibility for all members of our school community.

'Reculturing' for change

The term 'reculturing' can mean many different things depending upon both purpose and context. At Myponga Primary School, what we did and how we did it was guided by contextual issues as well as by the school's recent history. By 'reculturing' we mean working together to take up the challenge of rethinking who we are as a learning community and redefining our purpose and our goals in ways that reflect shared values and beliefs, and in ways that would enable every individual to achieve their potential and contribute fully as lifelong learners.

Achieving a state of community wellbeing at a time of deep division and uncertainty seemed to us to be a lofty goal, and at times along the way it felt as if it might also be out of our reach. In truth, at the beginning we were unsure just how to go about creating and sustaining a reculturing process, as negative attitudes, excluding behaviours, and conflict seemed so deeply entrenched in the culture of the school. There were also ethical issues regarding: 'Who are we to change things anyway?' and 'Why change this and not that?' Clearly no 'quick fix' program or simple solution was going to make the deep and far reaching changes we anticipated.

Any endeavour to create paradigm shifts in thinking for our students, parents and teachers would require a preparedness to seek out and embrace new knowledge: we would need a strong commitment, wisdom and guidance as well as careful planning: we would need to examine our own beliefs and actions and be prepared to engage in deep thinking, dialogue and debate. We would all need to learn to suspend judgement and listen to the thoughts, experiences and perceptions of others who may think very differently from ourselves.

The opportunity to participate in the Drug Strategy Social Inclusion Research and Development Project proved both timely and valuable to our subsequent successes. We recognised that, through our inquiry research process, we would not only need to address the many ways students, parents and teachers excluded (and were excluded by) others, but also focus on actively and innovatively creating a culture of social

inclusion. Every action and interaction—every decision, every program and process—would need to be reviewed and analysed in terms of either its contribution to sustaining excluding practices or its value in contributing to inclusive ones.

The following questions framed our social inclusion research focus:
- What are the factors that contribute to sustaining social , in our learning community?
- How can we act to sustain optimism, build resilience and foster social inclusion for all students?

The journey we have undertaken over the past three years has indeed been a challenging one. The way forward has not always been clear. Opportunities have at times arisen from unplanned mistakes, while other sure-fired action has sometimes led to confusion and new questions rather than solutions. Courage, critical reflection, commitment and a willingness to think deeply about what we do, and how what we do impacts on the wellbeing of ourselves and others, have been the hallmarks of the change process.

What is 'social inclusion'?

Social inclusion is a concept that emerged in response to earlier research focusing on the impact of 'social exclusion' on individuals and on society as a whole. Originating in France in the early 1970s, the term 'social exclusion' was then adapted in countries across Europe and in the United Kingdom in order to address the causes and consequences of disadvantage in more effective, connected ways.

> *Social exclusion is shorthand for what can happen when individuals or areas*
> *suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills,*
> *low incomes, poor housing high crime environment, bad health and family*
> *breakdown.*   Social Exclusion and Cabinet Office (2004, p.8)

While any combination of these circumstances can contribute to the social exclusion of individuals and groups in society, there has been a widespread recognition that social exclusion can also occur as a result of either the deliberate or unintentional actions of other community members. It has become clear that this complex mix of circumstantial, environmental and behavioural factors requires thoughtful and 'joined up' solutions if we are to successfully create a more equitable and socially-just society for all. Subsequently, as both a belief system and as a policy direction, social inclusion initiatives in South Australia are endeavouring to seek new ways of working at both the macro and the micro level in order to bring about real change.

Research can provide educators with a deeper understanding of equity, social justice and disadvantage; however, it is also important for schools to engage in their own inquiry processes in the local context and at a site level. It is only through the process of questioning, investigation, data analysis and dialogue involving key stakeholders that issues of social inclusion and social exclusion can be understood in the local context. Only then can issues be strategically addressed in ways that make a positive difference for those most at risk of being marginalised or not achieving their potential as learners and citizens.

What does 'social inclusion' mean at Myponga?

Our own definition of what we mean by 'social inclusion' at Myponga PS continues to evolve as we reflect daily on our practices, as we engage in deep dialogue with students, staff and parents, and as we analyse data for effective change. We expect that our understandings and our thinking around the concept of social inclusion will continue to change in the future; however, at this point in our journey we have defined social inclusion in a way that links wellbeing and learning in the following way:

Myponga Primary School strives to be an educationally inclusive learning community in which all members:

> *feel valued, their differences are respected, their basic needs - both physical and emotional – are met so that as members of society they are empowered in their participation and contribution (Cappo, 2003).*

This means that at Myponga Primary School:
- We value and celebrate diversity.
- We trust that our own differences will be respected.
- We act with care, compassion and respect for ourselves and others.
- We understand that people can make choices for themselves that may differ from the choices of others and yet still feel accepted, valued and welcome in the community.
- We strive not to judge the actions of those who, for strong personal reasons, choose to self-exclude.

While these words sound noble enough, and while the conversations that have led us to this point of understanding have been rigorous, the really hard work has been, and continues to be, in the realm of transforming our words into actions in every aspect of school life. Social inclusion is not something teachers can 'add on' to what they are already doing, nor is it an activity or task completed in a series of detached lessons and then ticked off as 'done'. Social inclusion is everybody's business and it requires deep thinking, strategic planning and explicit teaching if it is to have a positive impact on every aspect of school life.

> *An educationally inclusive school is one in which the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and wellbeing of every young person matters. Effective schools are educationally inclusive schools. This shows, not only in their performance, but also in their ethos and willingness to offer new opportunities to pupils who may have experienced previous difficulties....The most effective schools do not take educational inclusion for granted. They constantly monitor and evaluate the progress each pupil makes. They identify any pupils who may be missing out, difficult to engage, or feeling in some way apart from what the school seeks to provide.* (Ofsted in Ainscow, 2001)

The courage to lead

While we could fill a book with the stories, insights and programs that have evolved, we have chosen in this paper to share our journey so far through the lens of leadership—not the leadership of a single person or a group of leaders within the school, but rather a focus on 'leadership' as reflected in the commitment and the actions of every stakeholder. We have taken on board Covey's notion that leadership is, in essence, the capacity to influence (2004). We believe that each of us, by our

words and actions, influences others every day in both conscious and unconscious ways, and the trick is to be sure that the influence we have is the influence we intend to have.

Effective, committed leadership from staff, parents and students lies at the heart of our reculturing journey. What has been important has been the willingness of so many stakeholders to step up and work in ways that take us closer to achieving our shared goals. What has mattered has been a preparedness by so many to act and to contribute in ways that enable these shared goals to become embedded in our community and our school culture. To this end, leadership is everybody's business.

> *Simply put—at its most elemental and practical level—leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves….Isn't this the essence of the kind of leadership that influences and truly endure?*   Covey, 2004, p. 98

The next part of this report was written by two teacher/leaders who have taken up many challenges in the past two years and who have, through their inquiring minds and willingness, always 'gone the extra mile' to make a significant contribution to improved teaching and learning at our school. Jenni Chand (School counsellor/class teacher) and Kris Mott (Drug Strategy Team Leader and class teacher) were very clear about what they wanted to write about when reflecting on their journey. They wanted to share their insights about the role that leadership—in all its forms—can play in the process of making a good school great.

Part 2: Teachers' perspectives

Jenni Chand, school counsellor and Kris Mott, drug strategy team leader

Jenni Chand: As a teacher, prior to 2002, I was very happy at our school. I was sometimes surprised by the attitude of blame that existed in the schoolyard. I put most of my effort into trying to improve the curriculum, particularly with a focus on literacy. I trained as a First Step's facilitator and I thought I had the skills and knowledge to save the world—with very little success! In the time before 2002, we worked hard introducing social skills, SRC and linking with the community. We needed the fresh perspective of someone new to the school to see that a number of things we had grown to accept needed to change before students were in a position to learn. Since that time, as the culture of the school has been changing, I often ask myself 'What is different now? Why didn't this work before?'

Jenni Chand and **Kris Mott**: Gradually it has become clear to us that there are certain elements of change that are necessary and they can be transferred to any other change situations. On reflection these are what we consider to be some of the key elements that we believe have led to significant change in our school. These elements are as relevant to our school as they would be to any other school that is in the process of bringing about whole-school change.

Key elements of change

1. Courageous and tenacious leadership

First and foremost we believe that what this means is the principal. We believe in broad-based leadership, using the skills of teachers, parents and students, but, in the first instance, a principal—with high moral character, a passion for kids and their learning and the strength to make tough decisions in the best interests of the children—is in the strongest position to initiate and motivate whole-school change.

2. Planning for change, timing and content

Change can be threatening, divisive, uncomfortable and confrontational unless there is constant and open communication that informs strategic planning. Our staff and school community have been given opportunities to speak freely, and time to come to grips with new ideas and have powerful input into decisions about what the issues are and how we can work to address them. Teachers have regularly been released to talk through issues of resilience, inclusion and drug education. Baseline data we have collected has supported us to identify the areas of need. Action plans for each key strategy have been developed, explicitly identifying strategies for change. Our planning always incorporates the collection of ongoing data to measure the differences we have made.

3. A clear, articulated change process

We never thought we would ever put this in writing. At first, in 2002, when working with our new leader, many of us found her habit of always creating and using written processes amusing and it became a bit of a joke amongst staff whenever another 'procedure' or draft policy appeared. Now, on reflection, we can see how important these processes and policies are. From the start we have used an inquiry-based change process that gave direction in what could otherwise have become an uncoordinated, scattergun, reactive approach to change. Having and using a change process kept bringing our focus back to what and why things needed to change and never allowed

us to drift into changing things just for the sake of change. It gave us a guide to continually move forward.

4. Finding common ground
This was an essential starting point for us although it took time in the beginning to find out what our 'common ground' was. Prior to 2002, we had already spent almost a year in establishing school values in consultation with parents and students. However, while we had a list of agreed values, there was not a common understanding about what they meant and how they might drive our change process; nor did we have a clear vision or mission to guide us. Some staff felt that our core business—teaching and learning—had been left off the list of agreed values and so, when we renewed our discussions about values during 2002, we agreed to add another value: personal excellence. We spent months examining each of our school values and defining what they meant for us in terms of decision making, programming, teaching etc. Then, after beginning Core Team Training with the Drug Strategy, the value of health and wellbeing was also added and, finally, our new school values were complete. We realised that the health and wellbeing of our students was imperative for their learning. Through newsletters, meetings, personal contact, phone calls and surveys, we were able to confidently say that by the end of 2002 all stakeholders were happy with the set of values we had finally come up with and we now had a strong agreement and a firm foundation to work from and take action.

5. Thinking creatively
Crisis is an opportunity for a new direction. The nature of change means that there will always be problems. As a staff we have been encouraged to think outside the square in order to come up with creative solutions to problems in the context of our own school. Our 'Valuing diversity' program (see Part 4 of this report) is a powerful example of our creative thinking at work. Another important development in our school is that the governing council has changed its meeting format now to allow an hour for curriculum discussion and debate in a 'curriculum spotlight' every time they meet. Parents and teachers raise and debate both concerns and queries: teachers share their programs and curriculum knowledge: parents participate in learning activities that their children have also experienced in classrooms. This has come to be a highly valued and genuine collaboration and partnership strategy.

6. Focus on behaviour development that is educative and restorative
At the heart of our reculturing process has been the development of strategies for managing inappropriate behaviour that are:
- educative, in that we take these opportunities to skill students in ways to manage conflict more appropriately and respectfully for the future and
- restorative, in that we work with those students involved in each conflict situation to restore the damage caused, and to rebuild more positive relationships between victims and harassers.

Our goal is to break the cycle of harassment, bullying, blame and distrust, and to create a cycle of tolerance, optimism, respect and valuing diversity. In 2003 students were actively involved at every stage in the research and development of our Behaviour Development Plan and, as a result, they now take strong ownership of the policy. Our behaviour policy gives us structure and consistency within a management system that is both transparent and clear. In addition, class teachers implement

ongoing learning programs to develop social skills and respectful conflict resolution. As we work towards a stronger focus on restorative practises, students often remind us of agreed policies and procedures when we become lax!

7. Fostering a culture of inquiry and critical reflection
It has been most important to reflect on our data and to share it with the whole-school community—students, staff and parents. We share all survey data 'warts and all!' We take action on all parent feedback. We develop action plans to address issues raised and communicate actions at every stage. This has contributed to the increased trust and confidence our parents have in staff and in the school as a whole.

8. Building quality, respectful relationships
Through providing genuine opportunities to listen to the voices of stakeholders in our school community, we have built positive new relationships based on trust and agreed values, and strengthened existing ones. People have been given opportunities to have their say and we have respected both their positive and negative comments. We value others and their contributions.

9. Explicit social skilling—teach it, model it, expect it
We have a school counsellor who has given us much guidance and direction in teaching, and in including values and manners in our programs. Her role has been a proactive one rather than a reactive one. At-risk students are identified and individual support programs are developed and managed by our school counsellor. The focus of support is not only on students' academic learning, but also their social and emotional needs. We now have a whole-school focus on social skills at the beginning of each term to reaffirm our values and actions. The language of the 'Virtues project' is fostered in every classroom and teachers are supported to model best practice in their interactions with students.

10. Broad based leadership—sustaining change
Change can be uncertain and even scary at times, but, in our school, risk-taking and participation have been fostered by our school's principal who has guided and challenged us. Through our quality change process, we have been encouraged to acknowledge our own strengths, to take the lead and to contribute in big and small ways to make a difference. Through a strong focus on leadership, at a range of levels, a school community has evolved that now confidently shows initiative to make change and is confident to lead new situations. The change in community and school culture will now be sustained in the long term because of the broad-based leadership culture that has evolved.

In conclusion
Whether in a school or a classroom, or indeed in any learning situation, these key elements of change are both essential and transferable. Remove any single element and our own change journey would have been diminished. Through the use of quality processes and critical reflection we believe we have now created worthwhile, sustainable change. This has been made possible through a clear vision, a shared commitment, perseverance, creative thinking and strong leadership that fosters change.

Part 3: The journey
This is the story of how we began the reculturing journey and what we did to move towards creating a more socially inclusive and optimistic learning environment:

The context for change
As the newly appointed principal at Myponga PS in January of 2002, I was struck by the daily expression of anger, pessimism and frustration of many of our students and their families, particularly when locked in a conflict situation. Local Myponga township and rural families spoke about the loss of their 'close knit country school', as the community grew in size and changed in culture; Sellicks and Aldinga families told me that they often felt like outsiders. Long standing community disputes often spilled over into our classrooms and playgrounds as children expressed their frustrations and unhappiness.

My primary focus as a new leader in 2002 was to listen deeply; to gather data; to talk to parents, students and staff; to foster debate about who we were and who we wanted to be as a learning community; and to establish the foundations for a reculturing of our school in ways that truly reflected and responded to the needs we identified and the dreams and visions we shared. A student survey in term 2 2002 revealed that more than 80% of our students 'did not like school' and considered that the best time of the school day was when the home bell rang. Students also told us that they preferred to sort out conflict themselves (using revenge as their main strategy) because teachers were difficult to find in the yard and, even if they spoke to a teacher, they felt little was done to resolve the problems effectively.

It quickly became clear that in order for our students to engage positively and fully in their learning, we first needed to attend to their wellbeing—to rethink and rebuild the learning culture by creating a place in which all our students would:
- be treated respectfully at all times
- feel safe and valued
- grow increasingly in self confidence, resilience and optimism
- have a strong sense of belonging
- enjoy quality relationships with and trust in their teachers and peers
- have a range of personal skills for resolving issues respectfully
- believe that adults acted fairly and positively when dealing with issues and conflict
- believe that the learning they participated in was meaningful, challenging and relevant.

Taking all of this into account, my challenge was 'where do I begin?'

Finding the common ground in 2002
With such dissention in the community, my first challenge was to engage parents, staff and students in a process of investigating what it was that we all shared: what we had in common.

There were those who told me that I was wasting my time: things had always been this way, it was the way we did things around here. Yet, once we began talking, it became clear that despite the restraining orders, the community conflict, the rapid community change and the history of conflict, there was something we all wanted and felt was important, and that was that we all wanted 'the best for the kids'.

By the end of my first year, emerging from the quality inquiry processes that we used (asking critical questions; seeking out the silent voices; encouraging debate; valuing all opinions; involving parents and students in the data gathering process, as well as the data analysis and decision making stages), came Vision, Mission and Values Statements that formed the foundation upon which all subsequent change has occurred.

I cannot say strongly enough how very important it was to begin reshaping the culture of our school by seeking, declaring and then deeply embedding the shared beliefs and common values that were 'our common ground'. Our common ground looked like this:

Our Vision
Working together to create a better future through the principles of:
- life long learning
- responsible citizenship
- making a difference.

Our Mission
Myponga Primary School staff, students, and parents are committed to working together to build a learning community in which we all:
- value diversity
- promote critical thinking and inquiry
- build relevant curriculum/community links
- foster independent, student-led learning
- enable all students to achieve their potential in learning and in life.

Our six core values
As a *learning* community, our planning, decision making and actions are guided by the following values:

Value 1: Caring and compassion
Caring and compassion means being considerate of others' feelings and needs, as well as our own. Therefore we will:
- act kindly and thoughtfully
- take time to know, understand and care for each other
- respect and value differences between people.

Value 2: Responsibility
Responsibility means recognising that we choose our own actions and the consequences that they bring. Therefore we will:
- stop and think before we act
- reflect and learn from our experiences
- make choices that are good for ourselves and for others.

Value 3: Self-confidence
Self-confidence means being aware of our potential to be successful and achieve our personal dreams and goals. Therefore we will:
- have a positive attitude and use our 'mistakes' as opportunities for learning
- take pride in our efforts and achievements and those of others
- take the initiative to make things better in everything we do.

Value 4: Honesty
Honesty means being true to ourselves and others. Therefore we will:
- know and share our own beliefs and ideas
- listen to and respect the beliefs and ideas of others
- have the courage to do what is right, even when it is unpopular or difficult to do so.

Value 5: Personal excellence
Personal excellence means doing the best we can do and celebrating our achievements, big and small. Therefore we will:
- strive to learn, work and act to achieve our goals to our full potential
- initiate and take up opportunities to contribute and make a difference
- face our frustrations and never give up.

Value 6: Health and wellbeing
Health and wellbeing means taking responsibility for making choices that contribute positively to our own health, vitality and happiness and to that of others. Therefore we will:
- seek information and make wise choices about what we eat, drink and do
- maintain a healthy balance of work, play, recreation and exercise
- use social skills and conflict resolution strategies positively
- nurture mind, body and spirit in ways that enable us to achieve our individual potential.

Our value of health and wellbeing was developed following our participation in Drug Strategy training, during which time it became clear that health and wellbeing were essential to successful learning and achievement.

Reculturing for wellbeing and learning—where to begin? Term 1 2003
With our agreed common goals finally in place, in week 0 of 2003, at the start of my second year, all staff participated in a process to develop a plan for creating our new, shared future. We used a 'think boldly' process involving reflection and visioning in order to gain a better understanding of the current learning culture and how it came to be this way. The process then enabled us to build on these understandings and plan our way forward, creating a learning culture that promoted wellbeing, optimism and resilience for students and parents. Step by step, on one single day in week 0, we completed the following tasks.

1. Starting a review process to 'think boldly' about change
We began by working in groups to talk about and share our experiences, perceptions and thoughts about our school to date. This was an important place to begin, as it valued the prior knowledge of stakeholders while at the same time developing a snapshot of the factors influencing our school's recent history (over the past decade). Themes that emerged from the brainstorming process included:

Acknowledging the past—our recent historical context:

Many families living in poverty

Increasing school numbers

High incidence of family dysfunction

Urban/rural isolation/disadvantage

Community conflict

Traditional farming families vs. newly developing urban families

Bus behaviour issues

'Exclusive' sport clubs

Lack of public transport

Diverse family beliefs and values

Parents in conflict—restraining orders

'Them vs. us' perception

Myponga vs. Sellicks tensions

Parents often distrustful of staff

School reputation as a 'tough school'— 'it's always been this way'

Bullying and harassment seen as part of the culture

Expectation that increasing the severity of punishment would solve things.

Incidence of drug use (legal and illegal) in the community

'Payback' culture—culture of blame

Issues of equity in access to and use of resources

Expectations—low, negative

A number of recent 'tragic' events (for families and staff)

Frequent leadership changes

Low staff morale

2. Assessing past strategies

After brainstorming ideas related to teachers' perceptions of the school, teachers then used post-its and came up with a range of strategies that had been introduced to try and address the problems that existed. They reflected on: What were the strategies and influences that had been developed in the recent past to address these issues? How effective were they?

Strategies leading to now (2002):

Reduced class sizes	Despite smaller class sizes, teachers' stress and student engagement issues persisted
Assessment and reporting review	An extensive survey had revealed significant parent dissatisfaction with reporting procedures
Special Ed programs	1:1 support was valued, but mainstream practice had not changed enough to address individual needs
Literacy focus	There had been a significant boost to resources, however issues regarding improved pedagogy still a concern
Resource-based learning	Students were beginning to develop skills for independent learning
Behaviour management	A focus on a traditional top-down punishment model was clearly not working
Parent communication	Some improvement, but a high level of community distrust still pervading
Open days	Seen as very positive by the small number of parents who attended, but many parents did not attend
Minibus	Initiative endeavoured to reduce crowding and poor bus behaviour but was costly; bus behaviour still a problem
New buildings added to school	This successfully addressed a serious shortage of space but buildings were mostly unpainted and shabby
LAP	A great idea, but there were ongoing difficulties with parent involvement and reliability

3. Understanding the present

The next step in the 'think boldly' process was to consider where we were right now. It was now exactly a year since I had begun my tenure at Myponga PS and a range of pre-existing strategies as well as new strategies had been put in place to improve the physical environment, community relationships and teachers' curriculum delivery. We now took an honest look at the present. Teachers identified the following positives and negatives:

Strategies making a positive difference	Negatives
Programs to build students' self esteem	Students lack of motivation for learning
Strong, forward-thinking leadership	Poor nutrition an issue for some students
Health and wellbeing focus—whole school and in all classes	Off-task behaviour, low levels of engagement in class learning
Goal setting a focus—for teachers and students	Family/community disputes and issues ongoing
Caring environment	Overload/burnout for staff still an issue
Open days—community links programs	Staff feeling unsafe in yard and when dealing with angry students and parents
Special programs to address specific issues and needs	
Increasingly enthusiastic staff	
'Valuing diversity' focus making a difference to attitudes	
Parent support gradually growing	
Great teachers, more positive attitudes	
Facilities improving—school painted, looks great	
SSO's/admin are excellent	
Essential Learnings focus important	

4. Probable future

The next step in the 'think boldly' process was to brainstorm our responses to the following question: If things were to continue on just as they were, and we chose not to do or change anything, what would be the probable outcome?

At our school we would have:
- A community 'at risk'
- Students who are asset poor/virtue poor

If we *do not* take positive action:

Probable future
(If we do *not* plan and act now)

- Students do not achieve their full potential.
- Students feel they are victims of an unfair world.
- Students see problems as insurmountable and give up.
- Students make decisions that are not in their best interests or in the best interests of others.
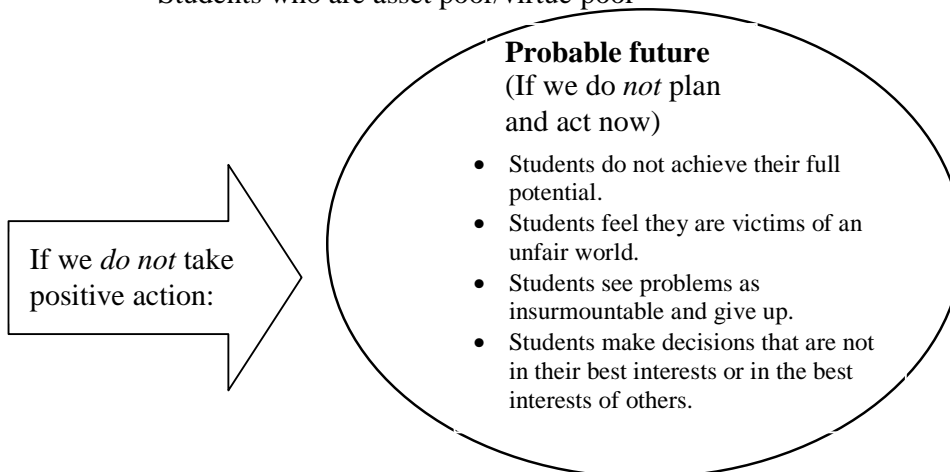
5. Preferred future
After considering what a 'probable future' might look like, we then imagined our 'preferred future'. We asked: What do we want for our school and our students? If we actively renewed our commitment to continuous improvement, used data for change and adopted quality change processes (action research, inquiry-based processes, critical dialogue, data analysis, community consultation, innovative thinking), what would be the preferred outcome for our students?

At our school we would have:
- A community 'at promise'
- Students who are asset rich/virtue rich

If we *do* take positive action:

Preferred future

Our vision:
Working together to create a better future through the principles of:
- life long learning
- responsible citizenship
- making a difference.

6. How do we achieve our preferred future?
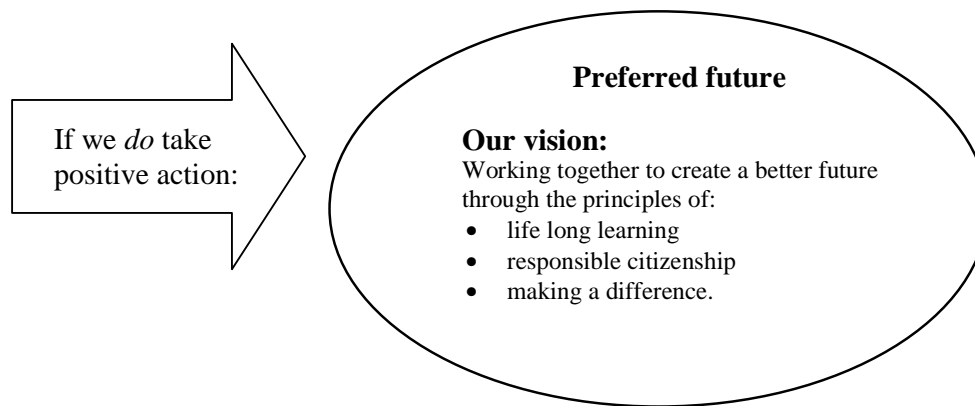The next step in the process was to ask: Given that we had all agreed that we had a strong, shared commitment to our preferred future, what did we need to do right now to start working towards achieving it? Staff brainstormed the following ideas, programs and strategies:

Virtues Project	Excellence and celebrating achievements
Positive role models	Displaying students' work
Protective behaviours	Student-initiated curriculum
Student ownership	Problem solving skills
Value cultural capital	Celebrate diversity
Build community links	Positive thinking skills
Safe supportive environment	Peaceful conflict resolution
Role playing/modelling	Empower students to deal with adversity
Value effort	Foster resilience, having a go
Explicit social skills	Prepare kids for life's realities
SRC/class meetings	Stronger more authentic student voice

This brainstorm provided us with a range of strategies to consider and it served to kick-start our planning from the beginning of 2003.

It was week 0 of term 1 of 2003 and already I not only had a mandate, but I also had the basis for an action plan—an action plan developed and owned by my newly committed staff! We haven't looked back since!

Fostering student wellbeing and improved learning: 2003–2005
Since that powerful and interactive planning day, what action have we taken? The following list shows just some of the programs and initiatives that we have introduced since that time. Some of these strategies were relatively easy to introduce and simple to implement: others were extremely complex and required courage, educational risk-taking and time to introduce. All of them have played a significant part in reculturing our learning community and creating what is now, in 2005, a very different kind of learning culture at Myponga PS. Every dot point is a story in its own right, so the list below identifies the smallest tip of the change process.

Some of the many initiatives introduced to achieve our vision:
- developing a 'teachers' vision statement, fostering a cohesive, committed staff
- a focus on engaging learners through higher order thinking skills
- rigorous performance management, linked to quality teaching and learning
- teacher release for 'deep dialogue' research, reflection and debate—each term
- 'Valuing diversity' learning program R–7—three lessons a week (described in Part 4 of this report)
- behaviour development plan—developed in consultation with students and parents and focusing on the 'educative and restorative'
- rigorous collection and evaluation of class and yard data and follow-up action
- fostering proactive, positive communication with parents
- range of strategies for valuing good behaviour ('Star of yard' Awards, raffle tickets, lunchtime activities etc)
- Optimistic Learning Environment Project – a cluster initiative focussing on embedding optimism and resilience in our local school communities (see school website for further details)
- Focus Against Bullying (FAB) focus (cluster student-led forums on bullying)
- Primary Years Project (focusing on the specific needs of years 3, 4 and 5 learners)
- Drug Strategy Action Plan (a key strategy supporting health and wellbeing)
- a focus on manners (this simple but strategic focus has had a profound impact)
- proactive school counsellor initiative (focus on creating a 'learning environment')
- school logo initiative (students and a professional artist developing our new logo (see Part 5 of this report)
- chaplaincy appointment and role (again, proactive to support a changing culture)
- focus on authentic student voice (strong focus on local and global citizenship)
- focus on at-risk learners (a major initiative supporting individual students at risk)
- understanding, identifying and explicitly addressing incidents, processes and practices that sustain exclusion
- lunchtime/playtime program (activities for fun, interest, friendship-building)
- community artist initiative (developing a Myponga/Sellicks mural for our school)
- and much more!

Emerging initiatives are being developed on an ongoing basis.

Our inquiry approach to needs-identification, data analysis and whole-school change has also ensured that the list above has remained neither static nor inflexible—many additional strategies and initiatives have since emerged and been introduced as the knowledge, understandings and confidence in our vision have grown. Always we strive to ensure that our actions reflect our Vision, Mission and Values Statements.

Understanding the change process: focusing on questions

You might well be thinking that all this activity 'sounds OK', but what is the difference our actions have made? This is a critical question and one that we have been mindful of from the very beginning, and at every stage of our change process. Establishing a range of baseline data has given us important starting points from which to plan and implement strategies that genuinely reflect and respond to identified needs. Baseline data has also enabled us to measure and celebrate change in authentic ways.

We 'check out' how we are going with our stakeholders at every stage of each action process, always asking ourselves challenging questions to 'grow' our knowledge and understandings and to inform 'where to next?'. For us, the inquiry/change cycle questioning process looks something like this:

What is the issue or problem?
How is the problem defined from different points of view?
Who is least advantaged?
How would those least advantaged describe the problem?
Name the problem—the 'presenting' problem, the real problem.
Given the present situation, what's the problem for which this situation is the solution?

Who is it a problem for?
What is the history of this problem? Is it a problem for everyone?
Who is it a problem for?
Why is it a problem for me? Who is directly affected? Indirectly?
Who is least advantaged? Who is most advantaged? Whose voices are being heard?
Who else needs to be heard?
Now that you have this information, do you need to redefine the problem?

What's causing the problem?
What's causing the problem?
What are some possible explanations?
Given the way we have now described the problem, what's the most likely explanation?

What can we do about it?
If things were different, what would it look like?
What needs to change?
What choices of action are there?
Which action would best achieve our goal?
Who/what do we need in order to act?
What is our agreed decision/ action plan?

Planning Action
Forming an action group/team to support your action.
Is networking an option? What action groups already exist that we can tap into and work with?
What decision-making procedures will we use?

Who will decide? Does everyone support the choice of action? What will we do—short, medium, long term?

Taking action
Identifying specific tasks
Who does what? How was this decided?
How will data be collected? Has time been allocated to review actions? Recounting, retelling what we did. Timelines?
What happened? Problems, concerns, successes?

What's different now?
What did you learn?
What do you still want to find out? Did you change another person's point of view?
Did your point of view change? How do you know? What is different? For whom?
How did you feel about what you did/learnt?
Was the action effective—did it help you to achieve your goals?

What next?
How has what you have done changed what you will do in the future?
How has what you have learned changed what you will do in the future?
What goals will you set now for yourself? For the group?

What difference have we made?
We know the difference we have made as a result of the rigorous gathering and analysis of a wide range of data. This data is then shared with the community, not only to affirm the value of our successes, but also to identify and highlight areas for renewed focus and attention. Significant improvements have occurred in so many areas—social, cultural, environmental and academic.
Just some include:

- Attendance data has improved from 3% below state average to 4% above.
- Parents' trust and confidence in our school have grown to such a level that 97% of families said in our last social inclusion survey that they believed their child was getting a high standard of education in our school. (All families were surveyed.)
- Harassment data shows in excess of a 70% reduction in deliberate or premeditated bullying
- Class behaviour data shows a 50% reduction in the number of warnings/class sit outs etc.
- LaN and site-based data shows a trend to continuous improvement in the standard of achievement of our students.
- Most importantly, it is the 'feel' of the school that is the most intangible but most profound change for the better—kids, parents and staff now just love being here!

Building community links to accelerate the process
Significant change has been generated through closer collaboration between staff, parents and students. In addition, our change 'journey' has been supported and even accelerated through the building of powerful links with universities, cluster networks, and research projects. The following are just a few examples of ways we have advanced our change processes and our knowledge, skills and understandings through wider community links.

Forging links with universities
- Academic educators at Uni SA and Flinders have been both willing and excited by having the opportunity to assist us in theorising our practice, access current research papers and texts, and offer critical questions to consider throughout our learning journey.
- For two years in a row we have been truly fortunate to have a postgraduate social work student complete a two-term study program on-site at our school. The social work students gain valuable hands-on experience in supporting students and families at-risk, and the school benefits from the energy and expertise of a skilled counsellor.

Strategic project participation
- The QISP Project 2002 offered us an opportunity to engage in whole-staff learning about ways to envision and shape change processes that are effective and powerful.
- The QTP (Quality Teacher Project) has provided teachers over the last three years with opportunities to access funding, resource professional development and action research programs, focusing on site-based needs and issues.
- For the last two years we have been committed to and involved in the Drug Strategy Social Inclusion Research and Development Project, and the outstanding methodologies, directions and supports provided through this project have been invaluable to our school.

Cluster commitments and networks
The Sea and Vines Cluster (of which we are a member) has a developed strong focus on inquiry-based action research and this has supported and inspired change at a local level. Of particular significance has been that many of our 'projects' have been self-funded to address local issues in collective and innovative ways. We have chosen not to stand back and wait until someone else has set up a fund or started a project for us to join. Instead we have activated our own research and inquiry processes to make a positive difference locally. Initiatives included:
- The Optimistic Learning Environment (OLE) initiative—linking support services and sites in a cluster-initiated and cluster-driven inquiry-based research project. Our focus has been on achieving improved learning outcomes through a P–12 cluster approach. In particular we have worked to create learning environments that build positive attitudes, resilience, self-confidence, optimism and success in social, emotional, behavioural and academic learning.
- The Focus Against Bullying (FAB) initiative—a research project in which selected representative students from years 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 across the cluster have worked together to identify student attitudes to harassment and bullying; to develop a 'student workshop' on bullying; and then to take that workshop back into their own sites and deliver it to classes and parent groups. Our focus is on moving 'from punishment to education', and our next step is to explore the power of restorative practices across the cluster as a means of better addressing inappropriate behaviour and making our schools safer places for all.
- The Primary Years Research project—years 3, 4 and 5 teachers have been meeting each term for two years now to investigate the changing characteristics and needs of our primary years learners, and to develop improved teaching practices for these students.

- Professional development program—the cluster schools have pooled resources to bring highly skilled and innovative presenters to schools for cluster-specific T & D (ie, Randal Clinch, George Otero, John Joseph)

Change is not something that happens for a time, stops, and then things 'go back to normal'. Change is the one constant. Change occurs with our input or without it. It is therefore far better to be proactive and contribute actively to influence the change process and to shape the outcomes for the better, rather than to allow it to happen (as it will) without strategic purpose.

> *Social inclusion reflects a proactive, human development approach to social wellbeing that calls for more than the removal of barriers or risks. It requires investments and action to bring about the conditions for inclusion. Social inclusion is about developing the talents, skills and capacities of children and adults to participate in the social and economic mainstream of community life – as valued, respected and contributing members. It extends beyond bringing the 'outsiders' in, or motions of the periphery versus the centre. It is about closing physical, social and economic distances separating people, rather than primarily about eliminating boundaries or barriers between us and them.*
>
> Communitybuilders.nsw, 2004

Part 4: Innovative solutions—our 'Valuing diversity' program

It can be said that 'from problems can come opportunities'. The creation of our Valuing diversity learning program is one example of how we have thought 'outside the square' and turned a problem into a powerful opportunity.

In 2003, the Education Department was unable to find a LOTE teacher to teach our Japanese program at Myponga Primary School. Our staffing officer suggested that for the time being we appoint a contract teacher to teach an alternative program, for example physical education or art, so that teachers' NIT entitlement could continue to be provided.

At around the same time, and as the first step in our school's reculturing journey, we had just successfully developed our 'foundation statements' which we called our Vision, Mission and Values Statements (described in Part 3 of this paper). In the process of developing these, I had given my commitment to staff, parents and students that, once we had a strong agreement on our Vision, Mission and Values, these statements would guide our decision making and actions at every stage in the reculturing process from that time onwards.

It was a timely test of this commitment, therefore, when we were challenged to provide an alternative learning focus for NIT provision early in 2003. Rather than having a contract teacher providing 'filler' programs just so that teachers could be released for their non-instruction time, we took the time to reflect on our vision and we asked how this valuable teaching time (the equivalent of three lessons per week per class) could assist us to achieve our newly identified whole-school goals. Building on our school's strong commitment to our Vision, Mission and Values, we therefore decided to 'think outside the square' and explore the development of an innovative learning program R–7 that not only embraced the basic linguistic and cultural components of a LOTE program, but also explored a strong focus on multicultural studies, global awareness, valuing difference, fostering cultural understandings, indigenous studies and much, much more!

We negotiated the appointment of a contract teacher who we knew had a passion for these specific aspects of curriculum: someone who also had the skills and commitment to shape an R–7 learning program in an emergent and developmental way. Knowing what we wanted to achieve enabled us to make a strategic staffing appointment and now, looking back, the appointment we made not only made a profound difference to teaching and learning at our school, but it gave this skilled teacher a rare opportunity to teach from her strengths and to stretch her skills and understandings by taking her own learning into the 'exciting unknown'. It was a win-win solution that continues to have a positive impact on our school!

It was our goal through our 'Valuing diversity' program to begin at the centre, focusing on 'the self' and exploring self-respect and self-understanding, then to look outwards, beyond ourselves, to explore the wonder of knowing and understanding the uniqueness of our fellow human beings, including those in our family, our friends, our school community, our local community, our state, our nation, our region, our planet.

The 'Valuing diversity' program that we have developed has a number of key components, but its strength is that it is also able to adapt, expand and run off at

tangents in ways that genuinely reflect and respond to our students' needs, interests and passions. For example, when the war between Iraq and the Allied Forces first broke out in 2003, many of our students were deeply distressed and fearful. The 'Valuing diversity' program immediately adapted to develop a focus on peace studies as a key contextual component, and this learning program created spaces for the students to express their feelings; debate different perspectives; research for accurate information; and develop understandings about how they might contribute to peaceful solutions in their day-to-day lives.

Similarly, when our yard behaviour data continuously revealed the active role of 'bystanders' in contributing to incidents of harassment and bullying, our 'Valuing diversity' teacher immediately researched and developed a learning program for every class, R–7, in which students were challenged to rethink ways that they could act to be 'part of the solution' as bystanders, rather than be 'part of the problem'. In the process, students and staff also acquired a common language and shared expectations and understandings about our individual responsibilities when we see harassment occurring. As a result there was a measurable decrease in the number of times bystanders 'egged' on a bully from that time onwards.

Initially there were some concerns expressed by parents about this innovative learning program. It was said that 'we need to get back to basics' and 'we don't need to learn about Asians and foreigners here'. We did, however, have governing council support and so we forged ahead. Promoting the learning program and building community understanding were priorities. Regular school newsletter articles showcased student learning in 'Valuing diversity': at every opportunity parents were invited to share their own local and global heritage, as well as their experiences and expertise within the 'Valuing diversity' learning program: parents were encouraged to pop in and join in the lessons on a 'come any time' basis, and a range of special events were introduced to allow children to share the valuable learning from the program in more formal ways with families and community members through, for example, our Health and Wellbeing Expo, Harmony Day, Myponga Market displays etc.

In 2004 our 'Valuing diversity' program was expanded further to include an additional lesson for every class and this enabled our 'Valuing diversity' teacher to develop aspects of our health and wellbeing priority, focusing in particular on building optimism, resilience, assertiveness, fitness, team skills and other aspects of our Drug Strategy Action Plan.

In 2005, as the program has continued to evolve in response to our data and evolving needs, we have incorporated a focus on 'being active, responsible citizens who make a difference'—a key component of our Vision Statement. In addition, the core learning of our 'Valuing diversity' program is reinforced and expanded by our class teachers through mainstream classroom programs. Our 'Valuing diversity' teacher regularly shares ideas and resources, and plans to build consistency of approach and to enrich the learning for all students.

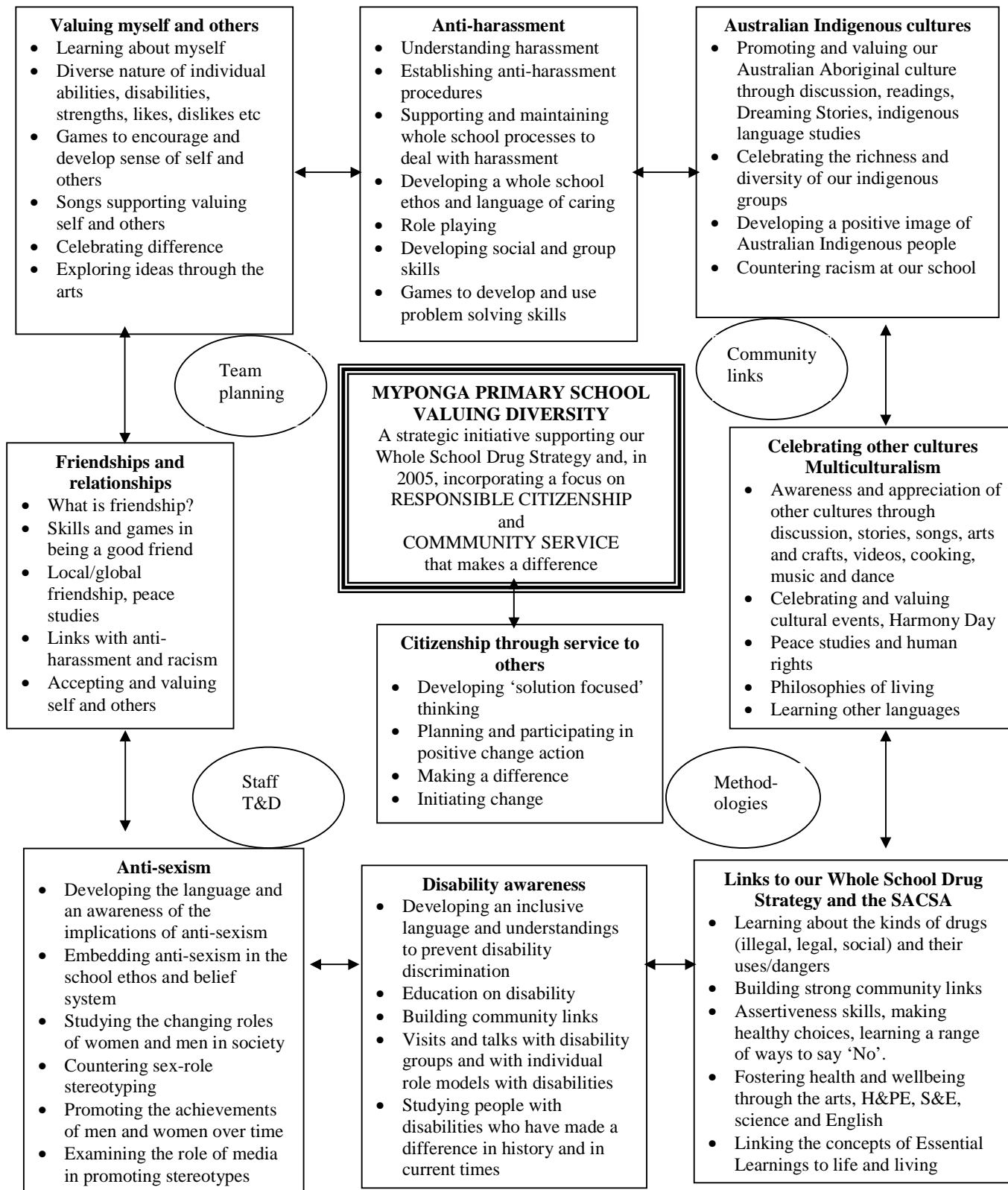**The significance of the program**
- Students now participate in critically reflective approaches to cultural studies, current events, and historical research, while seeking out and respecting a wide range of perspectives.

- Learning programs are developed, based on the school Vision, Mission and Values that underpin everything we plan and do at our school, and our new way of thinking is applied to explore and investigate emerging concerns or issues.
- Students have developed a new awareness of their own 'cultural history', as well as learned about the 'stories of others', as they have researched their own 'origins' and shared their 'stories'. This process led to a topic focusing on learning about our many and diverse 'countries' of origin, and our inquiry processes connected powerfully with our parents and families.
- A deeper and more integrated approach to indigenous studies and disabilities studies has enriched the students' and the school's collaboration and connection with members of our local and wider learning communities.
- Class teachers have been able to build on and reinforce the 'Valuing diversity' learning topics in their classrooms.
- All teachers and students now use the same language and share the same understandings about ways to value diversity, celebrate difference and resolve conflict in respectful ways.
- There has been a significant reduction in the incidence of harassment and bullying in the yard; off-task behaviour in the classrooms has been reduced markedly; and 'Valuing diversity' has contributed greatly to this positive trend.
- Children have contributed to shifting the thinking of their own parents and families, as they take an interest in the wider world and engage in more inclusive and respectful discussions with their families.
- Community Expo's and events have drawn parents into the school and they have seen first hand the value and quality of the learning in the 'Valuing diversity' program and now support it wholeheartedly.
- Our 'Valuing diversity' teacher has become an inspiring teacher-leader, contributing to all aspects of curriculum debates and development R–7 and supporting innovative practice across the school
- …and so much more.

The 'Valuing diversity' program appears on the next page. It is under continual reflection and review and topics are changed, added and developed as opportunities arise.

Myponga Primary School—'Valuing diversity' program overview

An explicit teaching and learning program, fostering wellbeing and social inclusion; building positive, respectful relationships; and celebrating diversity in our school and in the local and global community

Valuing myself and others
- Learning about myself
- Diverse nature of individual abilities, disabilities, strengths, likes, dislikes etc
- Games to encourage and develop sense of self and others
- Songs supporting valuing self and others
- Celebrating difference
- Exploring ideas through the arts

Anti-harassment
- Understanding harassment
- Establishing anti-harassment procedures
- Supporting and maintaining whole school processes to deal with harassment
- Developing a whole school ethos and language of caring
- Role playing
- Developing social and group skills
- Games to develop and use problem solving skills

Australian Indigenous cultures
- Promoting and valuing our Australian Aboriginal culture through discussion, readings, Dreaming Stories, indigenous language studies
- Celebrating the richness and diversity of our indigenous groups
- Developing a positive image of Australian Indigenous people
- Countering racism at our school

Team planning

Community links

MYPONGA PRIMARY SCHOOL VALUING DIVERSITY
A strategic initiative supporting our Whole School Drug Strategy and, in 2005, incorporating a focus on RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP and COMMMUNITY SERVICE that makes a difference

Friendships and relationships
- What is friendship?
- Skills and games in being a good friend
- Local/global friendship, peace studies
- Links with anti-harassment and racism
- Accepting and valuing self and others

Celebrating other cultures Multiculturalism
- Awareness and appreciation of other cultures through discussion, stories, songs, arts and crafts, videos, cooking, music and dance
- Celebrating and valuing cultural events, Harmony Day
- Peace studies and human rights
- Philosophies of living
- Learning other languages

Citizenship through service to others
- Developing 'solution focused' thinking
- Planning and participating in positive change action
- Making a difference
- Initiating change

Staff T&D

Method-ologies

Anti-sexism
- Developing the language and an awareness of the implications of anti-sexism
- Embedding anti-sexism in the school ethos and belief system
- Studying the changing roles of women and men in society
- Countering sex-role stereotyping
- Promoting the achievements of men and women over time
- Examining the role of media in promoting stereotypes

Disability awareness
- Developing an inclusive language and understandings to prevent disability discrimination
- Education on disability
- Building community links
- Visits and talks with disability groups and with individual role models with disabilities
- Studying people with disabilities who have made a difference in history and in current times

Links to our Whole School Drug Strategy and the SACSA
- Learning about the kinds of drugs (illegal, legal, social) and their uses/dangers
- Building strong community links
- Assertiveness skills, making healthy choices, learning a range of ways to say 'No'.
- Fostering health and wellbeing through the arts, H&PE, S&E, science and English
- Linking the concepts of Essential Learnings to life and living

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Part 5: Reflecting on dilemmas

Things did not always turn out as planned, despite our best intentions! What follows is an example of how unexpected problems can arise despite our best intentions, and how critically reflective practices can offer opportunities for deeper understanding when facing those problems that arise.

Early in our involvement in the Drug Strategy Social Inclusion Project, late 2002–early 2003, we discovered that sometimes even our best intentioned socially inclusive initiatives seemed to contribute not to the removal of socially excluding practices, but simply to a shift in who felt excluded and why. This came as a surprise to us at the time, although in hindsight it is perhaps a more predictable outcome than we might have thought.

Out with the old logo—in with the new

One example of this occurred when we were in the process of developing a new, more pictorially and symbolically inclusive school logo. Eager to ensure strong student input in the design process, we employed a graphic designer to work with students to develop and vote on a range of new school logo designs. The new design options heralded the demise of the long-standing logo image of the farm and dairy cow, in favour of the introduction of a new, more modern design image, uniting our hills and coastal communities.

However, despite the extensive consultation process; our commitment to representing all members and groups in our school community in the final logo design; the involvement of students in the actual design process in collaboration with a graphic designer; and the strong community ownership of the final product, we found that our consultation and collaboration offended some while pleasing others! While many coastal families were thrilled to be recognised in the new logo design, some of the traditional dairy farming families were now disgruntled because the new design no longer featured a cow or promoted their dairy farming as the dominant image.

We talked at length about this 'revelation' at the time and concluded that:
- We cannot ensure that all of the people feel included all of the time.
- Our responsibility is to authentically consult with and respond to the needs of our school community; to listen to all the voices; and to make strategic decisions about what we do, given that not everyone will always support or agree with what is planned.
- We must always strive to ensure that the decisions we make and the actions we take reflect our agreed Vision, Mission and Values Statements, as these provide the cornerstone for change at our school.

Understanding, accepting and valuing self exclusion

Then, early in 2004, a new family of three boys enrolled at our school. These family members are devout members of the Jehovah's Witness faith and, as such, are unique to our school community. It was a challenge for some of our staff, students and parents to observe these boys, on occasions, self-excluding from school events, activities, excursions and programs according to their religious beliefs.

Initially the boys struggled to make friends and join social groups. There were some incidents of harassment and deliberate exclusion (eg 'You can't play with us. You're a 'God' person!'), and these were quickly addressed and challenged by teachers in mainstream classes and through our 'Valuing diversity' program.

Some of our teachers also had difficulty accepting the opt-in and opt-out approach that the boys had to many of our day-to-day class activities. (For example, one of the boys opted not to eat a slice of birthday cake because they don't celebrate birthdays; another of the boys withdrew from Greek dancing activities: this was not because he wasn't allowed to dance but because the dance practices were part of the lead-up to Harmony Day, which was considered to be a public celebration that should be abstained from.) As the boys began to quietly and respectfully self-exclude from specific events and activities, some teachers engaged in heated debates about what they regarded as a pick-and-choose approach to self-exclusion. There were those teachers too who could see how this self-exclusion practice was impacting on the boys' social interactions and inclusion in friendship groups, as well as attendance and participation.

At year level team meetings teachers talked at length about this issue and we were challenged to rethink our own beliefs, assumptions and prejudices along the way. We were guided by Ainscow's overview of analytic strategies for social inclusion, when he says:

- *Start by examining existing practices and knowledge – culture, policies and curriculum*
- *Reframe differences as opportunities for learning – as a catalyst for improvisation and further investigation*
- *Scrutinise barriers to participation – including the subtle 'messages' students can receive that they are not valued as learners*

Ainscow (2001) p. 3

As our debated centred on reframing differences as opportunities for learning and as we scrutinised barriers to participation, we came to the following conclusions:
- Our role is not to judge the actions of those who may for strong personal reasons choose to self-exclude.
- A truly socially inclusive school community is one in which people can make choices for themselves that may differ from the choices of others and still feel accepted, valued and welcome within that community.
- The challenge for us was to promote understanding, respect and freedom of choice and to address any subsequent excluding behaviour in ways that supported and sustained our school's Vision, Mission and Values Statements.

All of this provides a background for what comes next.

Solving one dilemma creates a new one!
In term 3 of 2004, I approached my school counsellor, Jenni Chand, about my concerns for a number of students who (for a range of reasons) spent their play times alone and seemed to be having a very unhappy experience at school. These children were not necessarily the targets of overt harassment, but they had experienced significant difficulties forming social networks or feeling part of a group. The six students I had observed spanned a range of year levels and seemed to have accepted

their 'aloneness', however sadly, and often just wandered about alone and clearly unhappy during each break. Any attempt to partner-up these students, link them with other groups or provide alternative solutions had proven unsuccessful. While each 'excluded' child seemed appreciative of the efforts we were making, they also seemed resigned to 'no-one liking them' and to 'not fitting in'.

Jenni and I discussed how we could create 'spaces' for these kids to connect, to feel included and to build for themselves some more effective social networks. Jenni decided to get this disparate group of students together and talk to them about the situation. Jenni put it to the kids that she had noticed quite a few children in the yard at play times who had no-one to play with and that she was calling upon them to help her to come up with some ways we/they could encourage new friendships across the school. Jenni acknowledged to them that she had noticed that they themselves were sometimes alone in the yard and so that therefore they were best placed to advise and lead some changes—the children had the option to stay with the group or to choose not to be involved, although no child withdrew from the meeting or from subsequent group gatherings.

Jenni's initial aim was to try to find a common interest amongst the students that might inspire some fun activities and collective play opportunities together. As luck would have it, however, while most of the little group of six were 'mad about horses', another was 'mad about Beanie Kids' and did not want to be sidetracked from her chosen interest. Jenni therefore negotiated to split this initial group in two, to form the Beanie Kids group and the Horse Crazies group. As the Beanie Kids group was a group of one (a lass who was often self-excluding, as well as excluded by others in class and the yard), Jenni encouraged this child to invite a small number of children to join her who were also keen Beanie Kid collectors to make her group workable. This student subsequently invited some other girls to join her and so two focus/interest groups were formed. Each group began to meet with Jenni on separate days each week in their lunch breaks and the group members quickly formed new bonds, based on their declared common interests.

So successful were the interest group meetings, that there was an immediate and visible transformation in the physical and emotional expressions of the kids. The kids enthusiastically planned activities and talked with excitement with each other, with me and with other kids in their classes about the great time they were having. Beanie Kids started to appear by the dozen—Beanie Kids group members discovered that lots of other kids in the school also had Beanie Kids, and so they would stop and chat to each other in the yard, and share their knowledge and their favourite Beanie Kids in really positive ways. The Beanie Kids group visited the computer room to log on to the Beanie Kid website; they researched Beanie Kids histories; invented and played Beanie Kids games; and even encouraged me to buy one to keep in my office for when kids come to see me because they were feeling sad! Beanie Kids come with special powers it seems!

The Horse Crazies (the kids chose this name for themselves) spent several lunch hours getting to know each other better; talking about their own horse riding experiences; sharing their factual and technical knowledge (which turned out to be extensive!); watching the Australian movie 'The man from Snowy River' on video, then researching and reading together the original poem. This poem was a great hit and all

the kids requested their own copies of the poem and shared their poems with their classes and friends outside of the group. The Horse Crazies then planned a walk down to the paddock near the school one lunch time with Jenni Chand to meet the lady who owned some horses and to help groom the horses there. Pony pictures were exchanged, stories and experiences shared and ideas about what the club could do next abounded.

Jenni and I noted that in each of the two groups the previously shy, withdrawn and unsmiling participants were now bursting with smiles and confidence and cheeriness, and they even talked with us about how many other kids they had discovered were also interested in what they were interested in. The long-term plan was for these groups to take control of their own 'journey', with minimal and decreasing support from us, and so the kids were encouraged to raise, discuss and answer queries and questions each time they met. The unconditional terms of meeting together were that children and adults accepted each other fully within the group; that everyone's ideas and feelings would be respected; and that there would be no put downs or excluding. Questions raised and discussed included the following:

- Could we invite more people to join?
- Would the group get too big and spoil the fun?
- Could someone be in the Horse Crazies group and also in the Beanie Kid Club?
- If the groups got too big, could we afford treats, photocopying etc for larger numbers of kids?
- Should we include junior primary kids in the group and, if we do, will that change or limit the kinds of things we do at lunch times? (For example, the original group members loved to talk 'technical talk' and spent ages just researching 'bits' and saddles and breeds etc, and they wondered, if the little kids joined the group, would they get bored and complain and then no-one would enjoy the group gatherings?)

A critical incident
On the day that the small group of Horse Crazies kids planned to visit the lady with the horses in the paddock down the road, things got out of control. A number of other children, not members of the Horse Crazies group, arrived at the front office and announced to Jenni that they intended to go too: they demanded that they be able to go and complained furiously that it was not fair that some kids were getting to go and not others.

Jenni politely but firmly explained that this was an activity involving only the six children in the Horse Crazies group, and that it wasn't possible (for a range of reasons, including duty-of-care and the possibility of scaring the horses) to take any additional children. Jenni set off with her exuberant and happy group, leaving behind a small mutiny. In fact, by the end of the afternoon we were still dealing with the outrage of a couple of girls who refused to return to class and who told us we were being unfair, that we had ruined (literally!) their lives and they demanded that they immediately be included in the Horse Crazies group because they knew 'way more that those kids about horses' and besides it's 'not fair' that they couldn't join in!

Jenni and I explained to the most vocal vigilante, that some of the girls in the Horse Crazies group had often asked (even pleaded) to be able to join in and play with her and her group of friends and that on many occasions she had ordered them away and refused to let them play. This student, undeterred, wept and wailed that we had hurt

her feelings by not allowing her to join the club, and Jenni took up that point to explore and discuss the feelings of the Horse Crazies girls on the many occasions in the past when they had been told they could not join in with her own games and group. It was a stressful and challenging and tearful afternoon and it left us with many new questions and concerns.

After the crisis
Jenni met with the two special focus groups later that same week and shared her concerns about the incident and the associated issues. Discussion focused around:
- How are other kids feeling about these interest groups that had formed?
- Should anyone be able to join in? (The angriest child had already made it clear that she only wanted to join in the group activities when she felt like it because some of the things the group had been doing at their lunchtime gatherings, like reading 'The Man from Snowy River' poem, were 'dumb'!)
- What would be the advantages of letting anyone join the group? What would be the disadvantages?
- How could we move forward in a way that made everyone happy?

The two focus groups took these arising issues very seriously and were eager to analyse what was happening and come up with some 'inclusive' solutions that would meet everyone's needs as much as possible.

The Beanie Kids group and the Horse Crazies group decided that they would continue to meet on Mondays in their original form—they had come to value the friendships they had formed and the sanctuary they had created for themselves since the groups had first formed. They also decided that they would now get together two times a week:
- On Mondays they would take on the role of 'planners and initiators' and use their Monday meetings to plan bigger initiatives to be held at 'open lunch group times' later in each week, as well as to continue to enjoy special activities just for themselves, doing fun things that they are interested in etc.
- Then, on Thursdays or Fridays the two focus planning groups would run activities and events that were open to any child who was interested. Posters would be put up giving advance notice of events and inviting interested others to join in. On these 'open days' the activities would be available to all year levels and students and the non-negotiables would be on working and playing together, building acceptance and belonging, and having fun.

What does all this mean?
This is a long story and so if you have reached this point, then you have done well. Thank you for your patience! What has concerned Jenni and me—and what has confused us—is just how quickly our efforts to include one group can immediately exclude another!

When I spoke to other principals in nearby schools, they were emphatic that 'groups and clubs' should be, and indeed were, totally banned in their schools because they caused too many feuds—and yet we can see that groups form naturally in any society or organisation and they often develop around shared interests and passions. Being part of a group is often how individuals define their own sense of belonging.

So, in the context of our research as part of the Social Inclusion Project, what is to be made of all of this? Does banning 'clubs' and focus groups eliminate exclusion? Is the exclusion that comes from forming focus groups inherently bad? Can we find a middle space between the two extremes? We have so many questions and many of them are grounded, I suspect, in studies of sociology, anthropology, philosophy etc, rather than educational theory.

Here are some more of the questions we have been grappling with:
- In human society, is the act of social exclusion as inevitable and natural and normal as is the need to feel socially included?
- Does 'feeling included' (at least in some instances) depend on the powerful feeling individuals and groups get from deliberately and knowingly excluding others?
- Should anyone be able to join any group they like in order for us to confidently declare the school community to be socially inclusive?
- How can we allow for naturally forming and changing groups to emerge, thrive, change and dissipate in ways that do not embed exclusion in the culture?
- What is 'social inclusion' really? Who values it and who wants it; in whose interest is social inclusion; who benefits most and who benefits least in a socially inclusive community? There are certainly those at Myponga PS who bitterly resent the move towards a more inclusive school!
- To what extent should we focus instead on promoting realistic life skills, learning to accept that we cannot always have what we want and be included in everything we want: should we focus on resiliency and constructive optimism as alternatives to trying to make everyone feel they belong—indeed many have a vested interest in ensuring that not everyone can or will belong.

Postscript
By the end of term 4 2004 the two focus groups were continuing to meet with enthusiasm every week. The Horse Crazies made their posters; displayed them around the school; invited local community horse experts into the school for special discussions (about saddles, grooming, riding, feeding horses); ran several sessions open to children from across the school; and even arranged for some horses to visit the school for all classes to see and watch being ridden.

At one of these 'open' meetings, Jenni noticed that the student who had been so outraged at not being included in the original group was wandering about out in the yard looking glum. Jenni asked her if she would like to go and join the Horse Crazies group meeting, but she declined and wandered off. After some encouragement, this student finally peered into the room where the children were enthusiastically working with a local horse owner who had come to visit the group and were busily polishing saddles and stirrups and talking 'horse talk'. One member of the original planning group saw her and beckoned her in. The aggrieved student went in and watched what they were doing—and, without a word, the other girls moved aside to make a space for her, handed her a rag and went back to their chatting and polishing. Before long this child was engrossed too, joining in and being included without fuss or favour—a treat that she had rarely afforded the very same girls who were now welcoming her. It was a priceless moment!

The Beanie Kids group also maintained their commitment to meeting regularly. In fact, I even purchased my own Beanie Kid so that I too could attend meetings; join in

their Beanie Kid musical chairs; watch their Beanie Kid puppet shows; and play their Beanie Kid pass the parcel games at lunch breaks every week. The children helped me choose my Beanie Kid—it is the 'Peace' Beanie Kid—they decided that this Beanie Kid had lots of bright colours so it would be good for a boy or a girl to play with: it carried the peace symbol and so, when children came into my office after having an argument with a friend, Peace Beanie could help sort things out. While the agreement was that everyone needed to have a Beanie Kid to come to a meeting, every week children would bring armfuls of their own Beanie Kids along and then offer them to other children who didn't have one yet, but who wanted to join in the activities.

One Friday the Beanie Kids group were gathered on the floor in a room playing a 'Who am I?' Beanie Kid game. I stood back and observed the gentle, calm way in which everyone was included, encouraged to join in, and have a turn. Part way through the self-managed but very orderly game, a year 2 boy came in carrying his Banana Beanie Kid. The other children, all the while continuing the game, moved sideways to make a space for the boy, and then someone said 'make sure "Sam" gets a turn too' and soon he was involved along with everyone else. It was inclusion in action—not grandstanding, not directed, but embedded in the culture of this happy little group, led and guided by those same children who two terms ago were isolated and excluded by so many of their peers. Another very special moment!

Schools are people-places. For every happy story there is an unhappy one as children seek, with varying degrees of success, to find their place and build a positive social network. We know there continue to be children at our school who feel excluded at our school—for some it is a temporary experience, perhaps when their best friend is away for the day and they are temporarily at a loss: for others, after a more serious falling out, it becomes a longer term situation. Whenever a child does not feel they belong, whenever they feel lonely and disconnected from their peers, it is a distressing experience. Constantly seeking new ways to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness is a primary goal of all educators—making sure we don't inadvertently create the very exclusion we are trying to address is a key part of our success in achieving this.

> *…a socially inclusive society is a society where all people feel valued, their differences respected, their basic needs, both physical and emotional, met so that as members of society they are empowered in their participation and contribution (Cappo, 2003).*

In conclusion

Creating and sustaining a socially just, inclusive, optimistic learning environment, in which students, parents and teachers are able to take risks, learn together and cooperate to make a positive difference for themselves and others, is perhaps the greatest challenge and the highest goal for all educators. Creating such a learning community doesn't happen by chance. Nor does it happen by one group for another. Every stakeholder has a part to play and a contribution to make. Our policies, practices, procedures and decision-making structures must always work to identify and challenge social exclusion, while at the same time respecting and valuing the diversity and uniqueness of each individual within the school.

> *Our capacity to live with diversity in all its forms may be the greatest challenge*
> *of the new century. We must, and can, meet this challenge (*Levin, 2003).

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