

Diversity and wellbeing

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Diversity also refers to the myriad ways we are different in other respects such as educational level, job function, socio-economic background, personality profile, geographic location, marital status and whether or not one has family or other carer responsibilities.

Commonwealth of Australia 1998, Workplace Diversity Practitioner's Handbook

Bonding and attachment, belonging and connectedness, are vital for a person's mental health and wellbeing. The issue for schools is how to encourage students, in all their diversity, to feel connected by addressing aspects of the school structures and community that may be culturally unfamiliar, unfriendly, unsupportive and excluding.

The composition of school communities often reflects the diverse composition of the Australian community. The views that a school has about cultural diversity, and diversity generally, are reflected in its policies, practices, curriculum and ethos. However, even if school policy does reflect a positive attitude to diversity, it does not necessarily mean that everybody is clear or in agreement about the most appropriate strategies to adopt. It can be helpful to ask the following questions.

- How can you genuinely address the concept of diverse groups, rather than singling out or labelling some as 'different', when 'different' is sometimes equated with 'not normal'?
- How can you meaningfully celebrate cultural diversity when the entry point into other cultures is often only a simplistic look at things like food, costume and dance?
- How can you identify the best opportunities, times and ways to raise issues of cultural diversity in a classroom when the students and teachers might be bringing with them preconceptions and prejudices?
- How can you best deal with prejudice from staff or students in the school, especially if the prejudice is commonly reflected in the wider community?
- How can you balance having high expectations for all groups of students, while supporting and recognising diversity?

Working with diversity in schools is both exciting and challenging, and as long as diversity is alive and well so too is the potential for controversy and even conflict. Schools have a duty of care towards all their students, regardless of who they are. This is crucial, particularly during the ages of compulsory school attendance. Schools also have a responsibility to uphold state and federal laws concerning discrimination and equal opportunities.

Schools can strengthen and support recognition for a diverse range of students by taking a whole school approach to analysing and addressing school processes and practices. This involves considering ways to enhance their work in providing supportive environments, collaborative community/school partnerships and meaningful curriculum that promote the health and wellbeing of all students.

Exploring issues of diversity

Students can be alienated from their school community for a range of reasons. Inevitably, these reasons involve one or more aspects of their identity.

This section attempts to identify some of the key social and emotional wellbeing issues for some of those groups of students who are most likely to be marginalised in schools' strategic planning and service delivery. It also suggests strategies that schools can use to help build the protective factors that are needed to deal with these issues.

By focusing on the needs of particular groups, it has been possible to uncover issues for the whole student body and school community that tend to get overlooked. The differences are only those of degree. Dividing students into groups according to the issues they face is useful in analysing and understanding particular situations. It is not a good idea, however, when putting strategies in place to address the issues. When this is done, it can simply focus on the students' 'difference' and increase the extent to which they are already marginalised.



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Action inventory,
p 100

In developing this section, it became clear that the issues explored and the strategies suggested do, in fact, apply, to some extent, to every student in the school, whatever their background, whatever their circumstance. For this reason we have also collected the strategies together as an action inventory (Appendix 8), where they become an essential resource for a whole school approach to promoting wellbeing.

It is important to recognise that people do not fit tidily into categories in real life. They can be facing a number of issues at any one time. Categorising also leads to boxing people into what can become stereotypes. It is for these reasons that each subsection refers to 'issues' rather than 'people'. They are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues
- rural and remote issues
- disability issues
- same-sex attraction issues
- non-English-speaking background issues.

Although not all the issues are directly relevant to all schools, they are worth considering because of their more general implications. In the same way, the issues explored in each of these subsections may not apply to all the diverse students within, and across, each of those groups.

The challenge for schools is to develop an integrated strategic approach, so that the wellbeing of the whole school community – diverse groups and diverse individuals – is promoted.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues

‘But, Grandpa, how will people know I’m Aboriginal?’

‘Well my girl, it’s a matter of who your relations are, who grows you up and who knows you. It has to do with who you are and what you feel; it has to do with family, and a lot to do with community and friends. It has to do with the kinds of things we do as Aboriginal people – not what you look like.’

Kaye Price, ‘Conversation between Lindsay McCabe and her Grandfather’ in Connor et al 1997, p iv

Australia is an ancient land and has at least 50,000 years of Indigenous history. European colonisation (or invasion, as many people prefer to call it) is a relatively recent occurrence and one that continues to have an enormous impact on the Indigenous people.

The Australian Government defines an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person as someone who:

- is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent;
- identifies as an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander person; and
- is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives or has lived.

The definition recognises the realities of Indigenous societies today. It rejects the purely ‘racial’ classification of the past and includes contemporary social and cultural factors. Physical appearance, skin tone and lifestyle are irrelevant (Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner 2001).

It was only in 1967 that Australians voted to grant full citizenship to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in 1992 that the High Court in its Mabo decision overruled the legal basis of removal of land title from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – *terra nullius*.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sites

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National agencies

The 1996 census estimated that:

- For the previous five years the Indigenous population had been growing by about 2.3% annually, the growth figure for the whole population being only about half that.
- More than 50% of the Indigenous population live in New South Wales or Queensland, and 25% live in Western Australia or the Northern Territory.
- Almost 73% of Indigenous people live in urban areas, though there are important regional variations, and this figure is increasing.
- Forty per cent are under 15 years of age, and only 2.6% are older than 65 years – a reflection of poor health and premature mortality; the Indigenous population is much younger than the non-Indigenous population.
- In 1996, 74% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 15-year-olds were enrolled in full-time education compared with 93.7% of all 15-year-olds. In 1997, 30% of Indigenous students remained at school until year 12 compared with 72.8% of non-Indigenous students.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996a

Additionally, in 1994, a national survey found that 21% spoke an Indigenous language; more than 84% of people over 13 years of age saw Elders as important; slightly less than 60% 'identified with a clan, tribal or language group'; and about 75% recognised a homeland area and attended Indigenous cultural activities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996b).

Health and wellbeing

'Health' to Aboriginal peoples is a matter of determining all aspects of their life, including control over their physical environment, of dignity, of community self-esteem, and of justice.

National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989, p ix

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Health promotion

For Indigenous people health is holistic – 'life is health is life' (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989). There is no separation between mental and physical health and these are both related to cultural and spiritual wellbeing. It is for this reason that the term 'social and emotional wellbeing' is preferred to mental health. It is also important to understand that some Indigenous people, in common with people from many cultural backgrounds, understand mental illness differently from how it is generally understood by the health sector. This is another reason why working in partnership with the community is so important.

The following needs have been identified as central to the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

- high self-esteem and self-confidence
- the freedom to communicate needs and feelings
- the ability to love and be loved
- a sense of belonging to family and community
- the ability to cope with stress
- being able to relate, create and to assert oneself
- having options for change that help the development of a problem solving approach
- being comfortable with your environment
- believing in something (family, community, culture, religion).

Swan & Raphael 1995, Ways Forward, p 17

These needs apply not just to Indigenous Australians, of course, but to people everywhere. However, the particular history of Indigenous people means that they may experience and feel many of these needs in very acute and urgent ways.

Connectedness and resilience

Feelings of connectedness to family, friends, community and school have been shown to underpin an individual's resilience. For Indigenous Australians connectedness to country can be an additional element. While Indigenous students may feel connected to their own culture and communities, their experience of school can be as a foreign environment. In addition to this feeling of disconnection, Indigenous students may be actively marginalised or discriminated against in school settings. This has direct mental health implications.

- If there are very few Indigenous students in the school, ensure that links with students in other schools are established, if they are wanted.

ACTION

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Education policies and strategies

Questions are always asked of me about relationships within family groups. White people try to put the groupings in boxes, like cousins, second cousins, third cousins and so on. But to us, a cousin is a cousin, an uncle is an uncle, and an aunty is an aunty. We know we all belong to each other and that is our strength, you see. Because of this big mob that we are a part of, the impact of attitudes when I was growing up was lessened because we had each other and we knew where we came from ...

As a child I always knew where I belonged. You grow into an awareness of being Aboriginal, you grow into knowing about your culture from being around your mum and dad and your aunts and uncles ...

Pryor, Boori (Monty) 1998, Maybe Tomorrow, Penguin Books Australia, pp 9–10, 19

It is important that schools build on Indigenous students' pride in their culture and nurture their aspirations. These positive feelings are sometimes thwarted by school environments (Groome & Hamilton 1995).

ACTION

- Ensure that the facts of our collective Australian history are taught accurately and without denial, portraying the ongoing impact that colonisation has on Indigenous people.
- Include Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies as discrete subjects.
- Include Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum.

'... respect for, and understanding of, Indigenous cultures are fundamental prerequisites for improving the levels of achievement of Indigenous students.'

McRae et al 2000a, p 7

Matters of identity, so important in a person knowing who they are and where they belong, can be very confusing and distressing for young Indigenous Australians. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in particular seem to be experiencing enormous confusion about their roles as males within their own communities and the broader Australian society. Some young men can experience tension between being treated as a man in their community and a child at school. In some communities, this situation is exacerbated by the lack of male role-models in older generations, as a result of high rates of incarceration and premature death.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sites

One of the major impediments to the success of Indigenous students is an institutional unwillingness to modify any arrangements – regarding content, teaching methods, structures, organisation ...

McRae et al 2000a, p 7

Schools are usually aware that, compared with non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students have lower rates of attendance, retention and academic achievement. What schools are often not aware of is that these outcomes can reflect the degree of connectedness that students feel with school.

While participation rates of Indigenous students in early childhood and primary schooling have improved dramatically, and year 12 retention rates have risen to more than 30%, there are still significant problems with secondary school access, absenteeism and early school leaving age. Indigenous students are less than half as likely as other Australian students to go through to year 12 (APAPDC 2001).

We can 'make or break' them as students and, in the longer term, may influence their potential to become [positive] contributing members of society. We have either witnessed or learnt by 'trial and error' in our early years of teaching, the 'self fulfilling prophecy' of students assuming behaviours that reflect our words and actions. If we continually tell students they are slow learners or 'stupid' or 'dumb'; or that they are disinterested or 'don't care'; or that they are disruptive or 'no good'; then they will often react by behaving in accordance with our attitudes towards them. Alternatively, students who are encouraged, and their efforts praised and rewarded, will usually develop and grow as learners.

Tripcony 2000

The *What Works?* report (McRae et al 2000a) identifies several factors that seem to be working against increased participation and retention rates. These include:

- the loss, in secondary school, of the pastoral intimacy that is characteristic of primary schooling;
- students' skill levels stretched past coping and hence an ever-growing record of academic failure;
- an increasing incidence of confrontations about behaviour;
- impatience with the passive nature of much schooling, coupled with influence from peers who have already left school;
- encounters with more aggravated forms of racism;
- a curriculum that becomes more abstract and less obviously relevant to the lives of students;
- a curriculum that breaks learning into subject areas with different teachers, so that many teacher relationships have to be formed.

Apparent low self-esteem may manifest in the school context, yet not within the student's home and community.

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Education and health reports

'Some [young Aboriginal men] have the need to radically affirm their Aboriginality because they feel excluded from the wider society. Others have the desire to radically disavow it. The middle can be a lonely place ...'

Donaghy 1997, p 133

Schools may need to make special provision for the needs of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

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National agencies

ACTION

In addition to these identified factors, another major issue is that many students go to great lengths to try to mask their illiteracy. Although literacy is a powerful tool for personal and social empowerment, it is difficult to address the problem when it is hidden by things such as absenteeism. As well, as students get older and the gap between their skills and those of other students continues to increase, many give up, drop out of school or deliberately get expelled. A serious issue for schools to address is 'a systemic lack of optimism and belief in educational success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' (MCEETYA 2000a, p 10).

- Make literacy a top priority for students in all areas of the curriculum.
- Explore ways to teach literacy so that learning as an adolescent or young adult is not seen as a source of shame.
- Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in non-literacy-based ways, for both informal and formal assessments.
- Ensure that students can form ongoing, supportive relationships with members of staff.
- Explicitly teach study and organisational skills.

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Disability sites

A sense of country, spirituality, kin, family and community is strongly felt by most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to a far greater extent than that felt by many non-Indigenous Australians. This sense, which is one of belonging, is crucial for the social and emotional well-being of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Schools have a particular responsibility to be places where all Indigenous Australians feel as welcome and as culturally 'safe' as other Australians, so that they can feel connected to them [schools]. To do this, schools must understand and acknowledge Indigenous Australians' cultural ties and traditions.

Commonwealth of Australia 2000b, The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000–2004

Other issues that directly impact on connectedness may include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students having difficulty connecting with the school community, if there are very few of them in the school;
- schools overlooking the needs of Indigenous students due to low enrolments;
- schools having lower expectations of the abilities of Indigenous students;
- many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children having a significant hearing disability – due to chronic *otitis media* – which impacts on their sense of general wellbeing.

mind
matters

MindMatters has been adapted for deaf students as part of the National Mental Health Education Project for Young Deaf People.

Schools tend to emphasise the striving for individual goals, rather than creating a supportive learning environment. Schools and society generally take the value of individual achievement for granted. This can be a major problem for some Indigenous people and communities where individual achievement may not be valued and, in fact, leads to 'shame'. Another major problem for many Indigenous students is that they are in 'survival mode' – barely coping at home with issues of poverty, domestic violence and substance abuse. Students who do succeed in school may find themselves victims of a version of the tall poppy syndrome – or 'jealousing', as it is known in some Indigenous communities. Feelings of jealousy and shame by some may lead to the ostracising of successful others.

'Because they can't hear, together with the social disadvantage of their families, they're at risk and often drop out of school early. They are then subject, of course, to racial and social prejudice. So the steps from there into drug taking and low self esteem going on to delinquency and then to the juvenile justice system are not difficult to follow.'

HREOC 1993, p 707

- Provide supportive learning environments for Indigenous students.
- In behaviour management practices, acknowledge and make provision for what can be extremely difficult family situations.
- Work with the community so that learning and literacy are valued.

ACTION

We have survived

You can't change the rhythm of my soul
 you can't tell me what to do
 you can't break my bone by putting me down
 or by taking the things that belong to me
 'cause we have survived the white man's world
 and the horror and the torment of it all
 we have survived the white man's world and you know you can't
 change that.

Written by B Willoughby (Mushroom Music Publishing) Reprinted with permission



Enhancing Resilience 1 has classroom activities that help create a supportive learning environment.

However, against considerable odds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have survived. Their resilience in the face of adversity is a source of great pride. Celebration of survival has become an integral part of their journey of healing, and has been enshrined in celebrations such as the Survival Day concerts on 26 January. Indigenous therapy programs have been designed around the sharing of stories of loss and trauma as well as the affirming stories of resilience, coping and survival.

To conceive of resilience as only an individual characteristic, however, may ignore or disguise broader social processes and structures and their critical role in the creation and sustenance of wellbeing. The concept of resilience needs to be broadened from a fundamentally individual concept to a collective notion of wellbeing (Wyn, Stokes & Stafford 1998).

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Resilience sites

Examples of this are:

- Communities and families play a crucial role in maintaining culture and strengthening young Indigenous people's sense of identity and belonging.
- Relationships with extended (and extensive) families are often a source of great support and strength, by helping to foster resilience and offer some protection from the effects of racism. Elders, Aunts and Uncles can provide advice and assistance and may have a significant impact on young Indigenous Australians.

School staff must be aware that within some Indigenous communities, social interaction between certain relatives may be severely inhibited or not permitted at all. The advice of parents or care givers should be sought on this matter.

ACTION

- Have high but achievable expectations of your students in the classroom and in the school.
- Establish an Indigenous mentoring program in consultation with local communities and agencies.
- Collaborate with cultural teaching and community programs that promote cultural retrieval.
- Develop ways of effectively consulting and collaborating with families and communities, and communicating information.
- Ensure that the lives students lead outside school are acknowledged and valued where appropriate.
- Provide opportunities for, encourage participation in, and acknowledge success in meaningful activities.
- Provide opportunities to publicly acknowledge Indigenous Australians as the nation's first peoples.

Bullying and harassment

Racism is known to be a major cause of bullying and harassment in school playgrounds, and a key factor in the alienation of many Indigenous students from the schooling system. Racism is widespread in Australian schools and society generally, and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up with this pervasive racism. This experience places significant stress on them and undermines their social and emotional wellbeing.

Racism may be personal and/or institutionalised. Personal racism can be as obvious as verbal or physical abuse; but it can also be as subtle as exclusion, patronising and paternalistic attitudes, expecting less of someone, or claiming that someone of mixed parentage is somehow 'less' Aboriginal. Institutionalised racism, which permeates the institutions of our society – schools, health services, the media, legal services, and criminal justice and political systems – can similarly be subtle or obvious.

Schools have a crucial task in coming to some common understandings, with their community, about the relationship between racism, harassment and bullying. At what point does racism become harassment or bullying, and when should harassment or bullying be named as racism? Can being repeatedly treated in a patronising way be called harassment? Can a teacher not expecting Indigenous students to succeed academically be called racist? Schools have a clear responsibility to familiarise themselves with what racism is, how it impacts on a person's wellbeing, and what they can do to deal with it. They also need to become familiar with their legal obligations as regards racist discrimination and vilification.

The National Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness (HREOC 1993) concludes that many Aboriginal people have internalised the blatant and subtle racism that they have been subjected to, resulting in negative feelings, such as hate, anger, frustration, grief, depression and alienation.

- Develop or reappraise school policies on racism.
- Ensure that the school community is clear about the relationship between racism, harassment and bullying, and that strategies are put in place to deal with them.
- Make learning about the history of and contemporary developments in race relations in Australia a training and development priority.
- Examine classroom resources to make sure that they do not contain racist material.
- Use a critical literacy approach with students to analyse media and other texts.
- Educate about the causes and effects of racism.
- Explore the possibility of employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, liaison workers, counsellors and teacher aides.

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Legislation

mind
matters

Dealing with Bullying and Harassment has strategies and activities.

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Bullying and harassment sites

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Racism

Racism can be so entrenched in our institutions and curriculum that it is scarcely noticed, even by those who would see themselves as non-racist.

ACTION

Loss and grief

The life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is about twenty years less than that of other Australians.

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Loss and grief sites

Sadly, Aboriginal and Islander children are much more likely to experience death at first hand than children from most other groups in Australia. Because of extended family and often crowded living arrangements, and the persistent (and still unacceptable) high mortality rates among indigenous Australians, they will have more and closer experiences of death than their age-mates in the wider society.

Hunter, Ernest 1993, 'Aboriginal mental health awareness: An overview', in Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal, vol 23, no 5, Sept–Oct, pp 5–12

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are based much more on the idea of community than of the individual. This means that an experience of loss impacts on, and effects a change in, the community as much as on the individual. It is with this knowledge that we can begin to understand that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have a pervading sense of despair and hopelessness, brought about by being removed from traditional lands and, in some cases, from their families. There is a constant cycle of grief in many Indigenous communities, with many experiencing multiple and ongoing losses. European contact and colonisation effectively damaged a way of life, undermining the cohesion and wellbeing of Indigenous communities, and entrenching a divide between dominant and marginalised cultures. Many Indigenous people are caught in a cycle of institutionalised paternalism and dependency with a lack of choice or options; the trauma of colonisation being passed on to the present generation of young people, many of whom are angry and disillusioned. Some commentators characterise this as post-traumatic stress disorder.

ACTION

- Ensure that, in the case of a significant loss, the impact on the community is considered.
- Ensure that commemoration in the school is culturally appropriate.

Acknowledgement of history is essential to the Reconciliation movement, and underpins strategies to specifically address the needs of Indigenous students. All students need to know the facts.

The consequences for students experiencing loss and grief may well be anxiety, depression or a sense of alienation or hopelessness. As a result of this, many young Indigenous people, especially males, live on the edge, and indulge in dangerous practices, including alcohol and drug misuse. Because social distress can look different in different societies, such behaviour is often labelled as social deviance or interpreted as a mental disorder. However, within the peer group, these behaviours may often be perceived as normal, as the way things are for them (see also Tatz 1999). It may be important, therefore, for those working with such Indigenous youth to distinguish between mental disorders and mental distress (HREOC 1993). It is important to understand the historical and social reasons for such distress and not to see the problems as biologically or culturally innate.

Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples there has been a staggering increase in rates of suicide and attempted suicide, especially among young men aged 15–29. The figures for this group are thought to be more than double (maybe treble) that of other young Australians. The proportion of Aboriginal people under 15 years old who die by suicide is increasing, especially in Queensland (see also Tatz 1999).

Aboriginal youth suicide has some unique features. While there are some universal factors in youth suicide, there are important aspects that make Aboriginal youth suicide different.

These include:

- There is little evidence of clinical depression in individuals in the accepted sense.
- There is little or no correlation between suicide and diagnosable mental illness.
- It does not appear to be related to immediate social isolation. There is a strong sense of integration and much togetherness among Aboriginal youth (although as a group they may feel socially isolated).
- It seems to be rarely related to broken love relationships.
- It is not uncommon for Aboriginal people in many Australian towns to report attending a funeral each week, and much time is spent grieving for relatives.
- Although there is no evidence (oral or otherwise) that suicide was a part of precolonial cultural ritual, in some communities suicide behaviours now have become patterned, ritualised and even institutionalised (see also Tatz 1999).

Some students may experience feelings of loss and grief at knowing that they will always be considered 'different', and so will never be able to access the dominant culture if they want to. These experiences appear to be increasing as the gap between the literate and the illiterate, the employed and unemployed, country and city, and the poor and the wealthy increases. Despite all this, however, it must be recognised that Indigenous people can have well-developed skills in coping with loss and grief, and that these need to be acknowledged and drawn on.

There are different cultural traditions regarding grief and mourning in different Indigenous communities. An example of this is some Indigenous groups not using the names and images of those who have died. If these people are named or photographs of them are displayed, the loss can be re-experienced. If school staff are unaware of these traditions, they may exacerbate an already stressful situation, causing additional pain and suffering for students and their families. While there may in fact be some aspects of these traditions that could be drawn on by the school (eg for a

commemoration), it is vital that school staff are aware of the protocols they should observe. Advice on this matter should be sought from the local Aboriginal medical or health service and the local Indigenous community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not always have appropriate access to help and counselling. This can be for a number of reasons, such as:

- There is a conspicuous lack of grief counselling for Indigenous communities.
- There are major concerns about issues of confidentiality within Indigenous communities.
- Mainstream services are generally not able to deal adequately with the enormous grief, loss and trauma issues being experienced by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- There is widespread mistrust of mainstream helping agencies, including school counsellors.

The result is that help is often not sought.

- Ensure that students have a private place to access helplines.
- Find out about and utilise the culturally appropriate referral agencies and make this information available for students who wish to use them.
- Make use of culturally appropriate counselling and have school counsellors and key staff trained in cultural awareness.
- Research and encourage use of anonymous helping agencies, such as telephone and online support services.

It is important that culturally appropriate support be available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students when needed.

ACTION

White Australia has a Black history, and Black Australia has a White history.

Rural and remote issues

There is now widespread concern that the rapid structural transformation occurring in rural Australian communities is so disruptive to traditional ways of livelihood that young people can see no place for themselves.

Wyn J, Stokes H & Stafford J 1998, Young People Living in Rural Australia in the 1990s, Research Report 16, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne, p 4

As with all groups discussed in *CommunityMatters*, it is neither possible nor desirable to speak of people in rural areas as if they are one homogenous group. People from these areas are as diverse as those from the rest of Australia. Moreover, it is important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander students are more likely to live in rural and remote areas than other students, so that the issues raised here add a layer of complexity to those already explored in the previous section. It also needs to be noted that students with disabilities are severely disadvantaged in rural and remote areas compared with other children (HREOC 2000b).

These issues relate to students in rural and remote areas as well as those who have left home to go to schools in bigger centres. Even within rural and remote areas, it is important to recognise the significant differences between large country towns and small ones; and between rural areas close to cities and those more isolated rural and remote communities.

Between 25% and 33% of all Australian students attend school in rural and remote areas, and these students are far less likely to attend and finish school than their metropolitan counterparts (HREOC 2000b). While this in itself may not be a problem if the choices are made voluntarily, for many students this is not the case.

For most of these students, life is strongly defined by distance, and reliant on motor vehicle use. Transport to and from school has been found to be one of the major issues for students in rural and remote areas (HREOC 2000a).

These same vast distances and small populations, combined with the general downturn of the traditional rural economy, continues to result in major disruptions to families and communities.

New opportunities have emerged for some people in rural and remote areas, particularly with the development and introduction of information and communication technologies. While this has made life somewhat easier for people with access to these resources, others continue to struggle. Many students are aware from first-hand experience of the stress that is involved in dealing with change and in some cases with extreme economic hardship.

Connectedness and resilience

Australian country life still evokes an image of close-knit communities working together for the wellbeing of everyone. It is this feature of rural life that many people describe as a great source of personal strength and resilience. Many would not want, and could not envisage, living in any other way. Many students are resilient and their identities are affirmed through activities such as sport.

The concept of belonging in a rural community is so central to an individual's sense of identity and mental wellbeing that 'not fitting' can become a significant mental health issue. In some contexts, for example, a sporting culture, which for many is a source of great connection and

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National agencies

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Rural and remote sites

Rural and remote students and schools have specific issues, to do with their size and geographic location.

resilience, can be quite alienating or excluding for others. If a code of 'macho' behaviour prevails, this can be very difficult for both young men and women who do not 'fit the mould', who do not fit what can be very strong gender stereotypes. It is important to consider the groups of students who may be at risk of not being connected to their communities. If they cannot live in their communities with their sense of identity intact, they will probably leave or put their social and emotional wellbeing at risk if they stay. Same-sex attracted youth and some ethnic or religious groups may be examples of these.

ACTION

- Ensure that the school offers all students (including those who might be marginalised within the community) opportunities to achieve success, and that these are valued.
- Ensure that confidentiality can be guaranteed.
- Ensure that students can access support services and resources, either face-to-face, via the phone or on the Internet.

Rural and remote schools have specific problems with staff retention.

Rural and remote schools have particular issues in being places to which students can feel connected, the extent of the issues being affected by the degree of isolation and the size of the community. These issues can include:

- the retention of staff, which has direct implications for the connectedness students feel both to their school and to their learning;
- confidentiality (because of the size of the community) resulting in help not being sought;
- the ability to offer a range of curriculum and other options to cater for the needs of students;
- access to support services and agencies.

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Resilience sites

ACTION

- Ensure that the students' learning is structured and sequential, independent of changing teachers.
- In partnership with the community, ensure that new staff are encouraged to stay in the community and in the school.

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Bullying and harassment sites

Bullying and harassment

Because of the small size of most rural and remote communities and schools, students who are subject to bullying and harassment may experience it more keenly, often having no support. Racist attitudes (between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and also towards recent immigrants) and homophobia are particular problems. On the other hand, because of the small size of most of these schools, it is more difficult for any harassment and bullying to be hidden.

For students from smaller rural or remote areas who have come to larger centres, harassment can be a problem if they are perceived as unsophisticated, and if they do not know the 'cool' way to operate.

Loss and grief

The impact of loss in rural and remote areas can be as much a community experience as it is an individual one, because of the small, close-knit communities. This has significant implications for schools and how they deal with experiences of loss.

There are particular ways that loss can be experienced in rural and remote areas. These include the following:

- Young people in remote areas can experience intense feelings of loss for the opportunities they feel that they are missing out on in the wider world.
- Many students from rural and remote areas have to leave home to go to boarding school in bigger centres. Associated with such a move can be feelings of loss and grief for family, friends and community. Some decide to return home, feeling a failure.
- Students can discover when they go to bigger centres to further their education that the standards they have achieved in their remote schools are actually not on a par with those now required. This can engender feelings of shame and grief.

- Ensure that academic standards are on a par with those of the education systems.

- Students whose families are suffering economic hardship can experience this grief keenly, especially if their families are struggling to cope with the pressures, and if the family property is under threat.
- Social isolation and alcohol use are linked in Australia.
- Fast road travel is a significant feature of country life, and road accidents can be horrific.
- Suicide rates for young men (aged 15–24 years) are consistently higher in small rural towns than in metropolitan and regional areas. Rates for young men from small remote communities are twice that of young men in capital cities.
- In a study conducted from 1985 to 1994, general suicide in rural areas was largely accounted for by suicide among immigrants to Australia.

Source of suicide data: Commonwealth of Australia 2000a

WWW

Loss and grief sites

Students from rural and remote locations have specific needs if they are leaving, or have left, home to attend school.

ACTION

ACTION

- Ensure that the transition to the new school is as smooth and safe as possible.
- Ensure that students experience the new school community as supportive and caring.
- Ensure that these students can maintain relationships with family and friends from their home community.
- Ensure that support is available for families who may resist their young people leaving the area, for fear that once they leave they will never return.

WWW

Legislation

Disability issues

The term 'disability' covers a broad range of conditions, both in scope and degree, including physical, intellectual and sensory disabilities. People with disabilities have their rights protected under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, which defines discrimination and discriminatory behaviours. Schools have legislative responsibilities to become familiar with the relevant sections of the Act and to ensure that they have the appropriate strategies in place to fulfil its requirements. It also needs to be noted that students with disabilities are severely disadvantaged in rural and remote areas compared with other children (HREOC 2000b).

The history of people with disabilities has been no different from the history of any marginalised group of people. Their treatment has often been quite severe and harsh. The critical nature of this issue is highlighted with the distressing debate around the Genome Project, and the increasing use of genetic information to select which pregnancies should be allowed to proceed to full term. A debate of this sort has major impacts on how people with disabilities see themselves – on who they are and how they fit into the world. It heavily impacts on a person's sense of identity, which may already, in some cases, be struggling with the fact of a disability.

WWW

Disability sites

A person's sense of identity is a result of a range of factors, which come more or less to the fore depending on the circumstances. At times, people with disabilities may be treated as 'not completely human', depending on the kind and degree of disability. They tend also to either become 'invisible' or be treated as a problem. For these reasons, some disabilities are consciously hidden, particularly by adolescents. On the other hand, disabilities can also be unrecognised. Hidden disabilities can be most problematic because, unless a proper assessment can be done, appropriate strategies cannot be put in place.

In 1998, 8.1% of Australians aged between 15 and 19 years had a disability (Moon, Meyer & Grau 1999). Of these, a high percentage were in mainstream schools. In a mid-year census in South Australia, for

example, 80.4% of students with disabilities were in mainstream schools in the year 2000.

Connectedness and resilience

The most important thing to understand about students with disabilities is that they do not want to be defined by their disability. They want to be seen as the same as everyone else. It is when this happens, when they are treated just like ordinary people who happen to have a disability, that the feelings of connectedness that enhance resilience can develop. Some students will take risks at times with their treatments and behaviours so that they can do the same things as other people. There is always a fine line to tread between responsible care and calculated risk. After all, resilience is enhanced by the experience of self-efficacy.

- Ensure that teachers can access support from appropriate agencies.
- Identify and provide the extra resources (including time) that may be needed to support teachers in adapting their teaching.
- Ensure that the school community is supported in confronting personal anxieties around disability.
- Achieve a balance between having expectations that are neither too low nor too high.

One of the fundamental issues for students who tend to be marginalised in schools is that they do not feel that they can be part of the mainstream if they want to. Feeling or being excluded can only have negative effects on people's social and emotional wellbeing, but there are things that schools can do to help turn the situation around, if they are aware of certain issues. Experiences of exclusion, for whatever reasons, will test a person's resilience. Repeated and ongoing experiences will be damaging.

Students with disabilities are more likely to feel connected to school, and therefore more socially and emotionally well, if their needs are understood and catered for. Some students will have special needs for a private and safe place in the school, where they can self-administer treatment. Some will need all their lessons to be accessible by wheelchair, while others will need activities modified so that they can still participate and contribute.

- Ensure that staff receive information and professional development about the disability conditions, and special requirements of students.
- Ensure that staff have a realistic understanding of what learning can be achieved, particularly by students with intellectual disability.
- Ensure that staff and students are given strategies to cope with specific behaviours.

WWW

Resilience sites

ACTION

Students with disabilities and their families need specific support.

Because of the extensive range of possible disabilities students can have, staff and students need to know about and cater for their particular needs.

ACTION

ACTION

- Value and utilise the experience and skills of the students' families to encourage greater independence, contribution and risk taking in the students.
- Ensure that if students need physical privacy, this is respected and provided.
- Ensure that the staff member who oversees students with disabilities has power and/or status, and is an effective leader and a strong advocate.
- Provide particularly strong support during key transition times.

When students with disabilities feel that they are being treated with respect, their self-esteem and resilience are enhanced. When their participation is valued, their feelings of self-worth increase.

Students with disabilities may need to have special provision made for them in the school's curriculum.

Students whose physical or intellectual disabilities make communication with other people difficult have particular problems in this regard. Their experiences of school can be of loneliness and frustration, as other students and staff either cannot be patient enough, or feel too uncomfortable, to make the effort to communicate with them.

ACTION

- After consultation with the students and if wanted, establish support networks of students with similar disabilities.
- Provide parents and students with information about advocacy and support groups.

While some disability groups see themselves as having their own culture (eg the Deaf Culture, the Wheelies), others do not. In either case, being able to connect with students with a similar disability has the potential to build resilience. Likewise, seeing people in similar situations functioning in the wider community can also build resilience. It can be further enhanced when young people know that other people with similar disabilities have achieved great success and lived fulfilling lives.

School communities need to come to see that students with disabilities are just that, and that they have as much right, and responsibility, to participate in, and contribute to, the school and wider community.

ACTION

- Ensure that there are opportunities for student self-efficacy, achievement and success.
- Ensure that there are activities that students with disabilities can access equally with other students, or with others with similar disabilities.
- Modify existing activities to facilitate participation by students with disabilities.

Bullying and harassment

Verbal harassment is the major form of bullying of students with disabilities. In particular, name calling of students with intellectual disabilities is commonplace. However, verbal harassment is not always as obvious as direct verbal abuse. It is the actual naming of the disability that can be offensive, and damaging, whether intentional or not.

The identity of a person with a disability is not defined by that disability. It is part of the identity, an aspect that will be more or less significant, according to the circumstance. For this reason, people with disabilities do not consider acceptable those terms that define them as their disability. Labels such as 'cripple' and 'retarded' are still commonly used, as are 'Mongoloid' and 'spastic'. None of these is acceptable any longer. Respectful terms, for example, are 'person with Down syndrome' and 'a person with cerebral palsy'. Disability is only one characteristic of a person. The person comes first and the disability second.

- Ensure that there is a teacher in the school who knows and is trusted by each student.

Schools have a major responsibility to ensure that respectful terms are used both to, and about, students with disabilities. Knowing as they do how offensive some terms can be, and therefore how damaging of resilience they can also be, schools must make sure that their community is educated, not only about the respectful terminology, but also about the reasons it is needed. It is not just that some people are being 'oversensitive'. It is no excuse for people to claim that they cannot relearn a vocabulary when they know that people's mental health is negatively affected. Schools also need to take action to ensure that terms like 'spaz' or 'retard' are not used between able-bodied students, either in anger or in fun. People are abused even when the words are not said directly to them. One international tennis player calls the umpire 'spastic' in a fit of temper, and people with cerebral palsy all over the world are affected.

- Ensure that the whole school community is educated about using respectful terminology.

However, harassment is more than verbal. It includes behaviours that:

- are dangerous (eg hiding crutches, putting obstacles in front of a person with a vision impairment);
- offend (eg mimicking the person, telling insensitive jokes about disability);
- humiliate (eg asking a student with a vision impairment to describe a painting);
- intimidate (eg interfering with a disability aid, being insulting to the person about his/her or an associate's disability).

Adapted from Tasmanian Department of Education 2000

WWW

Bullying and harassment sites

ACTION

Staff and students who work with students with disabilities will need particular support.

ACTION

Schools need to be aware that there are occasions when students with intellectual disabilities can be the constant butt of jokes and teasing. These students may be so keen to have 'friends' that they willingly put up with a considerable amount of ongoing bullying and harassment to feel part of a group. This can happen so often that the students consider this 'normal' behaviour. It needs to be understood that being demeaned repeatedly will damage self-esteem and wellbeing, for all people.

Loss and grief

Students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, experience loss and grief in the same circumstances (eg death of a family member, family break-up, death of a pet) as those without disabilities. They can also experience grief for reasons to do with their disability. These can include experiencing ongoing acute loss and grief for their limited abilities.

Feelings of loss and grief can extend to fears that they may not:

- have a partner or lover
- be able to lead a fulfilling life in the future
- be able to have and care for children
- be able to be independent
- have close friends
- ever be 'normal'.

In school, these students may also experience grief when they cannot go on an excursion, to the school disco or on a school camp. Schools need to do all they can to ensure that all students can be included in activities and events, wherever possible.

Parents of young people with disabilities are also likely to experience renewed loss and grief each time their child fails to meet a developmental milestone. Internalising this as guilt can add to the young person's burden.

WWW

Loss and grief sites

WWW

Disability sites

mind
matters

MindMatters has been adapted for deaf students as part of the Step by Step project of the National Mental Health Education Project for Young Deaf People.

Same-sex attraction issues

Note: When considering this section, teachers and schools should be mindful that the content may raise sensitive issues for teachers and young people (and their families) of certain cultural and religious backgrounds.

People are entitled to be respected for the basic dignity that we all share. And if our equality, our dignity, is not respected then we have a human rights violation. ... We are all entitled to security of the person in going about our business. Violence that is targeted at the individual because of who the individual is – whether based on ethnicity or religion or sexual orientation – is equally an affront to all people because it strikes at the heart of our basic humanity and the respect to which each of us is entitled.

Chris Sidoti, Federal Commissioner for Human Rights, in 'Outing gay hate', on Cutting Edge, SBS, February 2001. Courtesy Ratan Productions Pty Ltd

It is a fact that there are same-sex attracted people in the Australian community, whether they are acknowledged or visible or not. Estimates range between 9% and 11% of both males and females. It is also a fact that being same-sex attracted raises additional challenges and issues in the development of identity. These can be very difficult to deal with, especially during adolescence, when a person may not be certain about his or her sexual orientation. We use the term 'same-sex attraction' for this reason, because it does not assume a fixed sexual identity or sexual activity.

Other facts are:

- In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders. In addition, both this association and the Australian Psychological Association state that there is no evidence to show that it is possible to alter your sexual preference.
- In a rural study (Hillier et al 1998) 11% and in a large national survey of more than 3000 senior secondary students (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal 1997) 8–9% were found to be not unequivocally heterosexual. People from all walks of life and all cultural backgrounds may be same-sex attracted.
- More same-sex attracted students were abused at school (70%) than anywhere else, including the streets (Hillier et al 1998).
- There is a greater likelihood that same-sex attracted young people will turn to alcohol and other drugs.
- There is increasing evidence of a link between same-sex attraction and attempted suicide (various, including Bagley & Tremblay 1997). The number has been put as high as seven times greater than for young people who identify as heterosexual (Remafedi 1998).

WWW

Same-sex attraction sites

WWW

Education and health reports

‘There is no scientific evidence that reparative or conversion therapy is effective in changing a person’s sexual orientation. There is, however, evidence that this type of therapy can be destructive.’

Rodrigo Munoz, MD,
American Psychiatric
Association President 2001

Although statistics show that there must be same-sex attracted students in every school in the country, the issue is generally not dealt with in the professional development of educators.

‘I am most afraid about what will happen at school. I know that I will get verbally harassed a hell of a lot but I’m hoping physical abuse won’t happen.’

Mei, aged 16, in Hillier et al 1998, Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-Sex Attracted Young People, National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, p 35

Issues for same-sex attracted young people can also include:

- how and with whom to discuss their feelings;
- how to cope with the intense negativity towards same-sex attracted people, and the subsequent possible depression, anger and guilt;
- how to be a member of a faith community that does not accept homosexual practice;
- how to build loving relationships despite exotic (eg the Gay Mardi Gras) or negative media representations;
- how to be part of a social group that takes opposite-sex attraction for granted;
- whether, when and how to ‘come out’;
- how to deal with stereotypes.

A whole school approach to the provision of safe and supportive environments for same-sex attracted young people can make a profound difference to their experience of school. It can also affect their future attitudes and resilience in major ways.

Connectedness and resilience

... I didn’t want to be a faggot, but every day other kids were reminding me that I was (whether or not they believed it themselves). I never felt I could discuss this with any adults including my teachers. The only time I ever told anyone that I was having problems was when I had a nose bleed that wouldn’t stop (another kid had hit me in the locker rooms and the teacher had seen him). The teacher had told me to forget about it.

When I finally decided to end it all by swallowing tablets, that’s when I was able to get some help. I talked to a counsellor who arranged for me to get away from the situation. I moved out of home into a refuge and started school in the city ... To cut a long story short, I ended up getting myself together and with help from a fantastic woman who took me in, going back to high school and getting my HSC and now I’m studying Economics at Uni.

Jim, aged 18, in Hillier et al 1998, Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-Sex Attracted Young People, National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne

Some same-sex attracted students, particularly those from a supportive family or community, may have no problems either in or out of school other than being harassed and bullied. In fact, those who identify as part of the broader gay culture may feel very connected outside school. Feelings of belonging will always strengthen resilience. It is the attitudes and behaviour of the broader community, and particularly the school

community for students, rather than the sexual identity of the individual that causes 'problems'.

- Establish procedures for staff who cannot be supportive of same-sex attracted students.

Same-sex attracted people are vulnerable to a range of implicit and explicit messages of rejection. These can occur in the media, in family contexts, in workplaces and in social situations (eg 'Haven't you got a girlfriend/boyfriend yet?'). Issues of belonging and connectedness will be exacerbated where same-sex attraction is regarded as unacceptable, or where there are strong stereotypical assumptions about masculinity and femininity. This is particularly the case in some cultures, and in many non-urban areas. Some young people come from contexts in which they would be completely rejected if their sexuality were revealed.

- Make no assumptions about sexuality of students or staff.
- Ensure that students, particularly in small communities, have access to outside, confidential counselling.
- Identify safe places in the school by displaying something gay-related among general displays (eg the counsellor's office, classroom).
- Consider the safety of same-sex attracted staff and students first in dealing with such a controversial issue.
- Include and acknowledge role-models who are same-sex attracted in the broader curriculum.

There are serious identity issues for students who do not have the support and acceptance to come to terms with their own sexual orientation, and who have to pretend to be someone they are not. Many same-sex attracted people do not have friends or a community or peer support group they can talk to, and so are socially isolated. The result is that they may 'act straight' by attempting to hide their feelings and modify their behaviour to fit social expectations.

No matter what strategies a same-sex attracted person employs to cope with potential alienation, it is a stressful situation to be in. Building resilience is therefore extremely important, and feeling valued within the school environment will certainly be a beginning.

- Ensure that staff know about the issues and implications of same-sex attraction.
- Ensure that school counsellors are trained in the relevant issues and strategies.

ACTION

WWW

Resilience sites

Same-sex attraction is a very sensitive and often controversial issue in society generally and particularly in school communities.

ACTION

Same-sex attraction is usually a hidden issue in a school. This has implications for how it is dealt with in schools.

ACTION



Dealing with Bullying and Harassment has information and strategies.

Bullying and harassment

Violence is an issue that is lurking at the back of their minds all the time [gay and lesbian people] the sense that they could be attacked and that they have to be cautious and watch other people. The pressure to control their own behaviour and ensure their own safety is something that is imposed on them by outside circumstances and it's quite a burden.

*Dr Stephen Tomsen in 'Outing gay hate', on Cutting Edge, SBS, February 2001.
Courtesy Ratan Productions Pty Ltd*



Legislation

In the same way that most of the harassment and bullying aimed at Indigenous students is grounded in racist attitudes, that aimed at perceived same-sex attracted students is grounded in homophobia (fear of and hostility towards same-sex attracted people). Homophobia is widespread in the broad Australian community, and school communities are no different. This is particularly challenging in schools where same-sex attraction is seen as a moral or cultural issue.

ACTION

- Ensure that all students are taught about sexuality and the development of sexual identity, including same-sex attraction.
- Provide education for staff on modelling respectful and inclusive behaviours.

'I couldn't turn to the school counsellor because I know that she talks her "cases" over with other people. I have been told of other people's problems and once I knew that I found distrust in the school system.'

Adam, 18 years, in Hillier et al 1998, Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-Sex Attracted Young People, National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, p 56

It is undeniable that homophobia can cause mental health problems for students and staff in schools, and therefore must be addressed in any mental health promotion. Many students, including those who simply do not fit the masculine or feminine 'model', report experiences of hostility, ridicule, exclusion and sometimes violence. Staff who are perceived as same-sex attracted may be mistrusted with students, and suspected of 'recruitment'. As with all students, the results of bullying and harassment can be depression, drug use, homelessness and suicide.

The main form of bullying is repeated verbal abuse, though equally damaging are less obvious forms such as snide comments. The majority of bullying is perpetrated by boys (and increasingly girls) who, like vigilantes on the lookout for lawbreakers, are 'patrolling the boundaries' of accepted gender roles and sexuality. Bullying and harassment of an individual will also have a flow-on effect to other students who witness it, and who are secretly also same-sex attracted. Same-sex attracted students (and students who are harassed or bullied in relation to sexual identity or image) may well not report the incidents of bullying and harassment. There are several reasons for this, such as fear of reprisal, shame about their social status, anxiety about further labelling, and acceptance that this is 'the way things are'.

WWW

Bullying and harassment sites

- Deal with name calling, when used as either a direct or general term of abuse.
- Deal with same-sex attraction as part of a broader 'building respect' program. Focusing attention could cause anxiety and fear.
- Ensure that staff who take any public lead are themselves safe from harassment.

ACTION

Loss and grief

The particular experience of loss and grief for same-sex attracted students is related to how 'okay' they and their communities feel their sexuality is. For some students with supportive families and/or communities, it is no more of an issue than it is for other people.

- Ensure that, as part of a more general list, same-sex attracted students have information about helpful community resources and services, including online support.
- Ensure that all students have access to telephone and Internet support services in a private place, particularly in small and remote communities.

ACTION

However, in addition to external events of loss, same-sex attracted students may also experience feelings of grief in relation to the implications of their sexuality. This can occur in a variety of ways:

- The realisation (or belief) that they may never be fully respected or accepted by significant family member/s.
- Feelings that their sexuality is wrong – representing the loss of a basic sense of human worth and the resulting feelings of shame.
- The recognition that their sexuality is not something that they can do anything about – including a fear that they will always be treated 'differently'.
- The feeling that, although they might be loved, they are a fundamental and ongoing disappointment to parents.
- Fear of rejection, and the loss of important relationships, respect and approval, if sexuality is disclosed.
- Feelings of love and attraction that cannot be disclosed or reciprocated – now and in the future – because their sexual orientation cannot be disclosed.
- Same-sex attracted young men particularly, who are part of, or who have connections with, a gay community will quite possibly know, or know of, people who are HIV positive, have AIDS, are dying or have died.

WWW

Loss and grief sites

ACTION

- Guarantee confidentiality.
- Allow time and opportunity to discuss some of the issues and challenges in a safe environment.
- Conduct exit interviews with students who are leaving school to ensure that they have access to the supports and help they need.
- Develop a strategy to work constructively with parents on same-sex attraction issues. In small communities particularly, provide support for parents who need it.

Non-English-speaking background issues

WWW

National agencies

... when compared with the general population, non-English-speaking immigrants have the lowest income, the highest incidence of poverty, and the highest rate of unemployment, other than Australian Aborigines, and are most at risk of industrial accidents and related occupational health problems.

Manderson, Lenore 1990, 'Introduction: Does culture matter?', in J Reid and P Trompf (eds), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p xiv

WWW

Statistics

Since the first major wave of uninvited immigration during European colonisation, immigration patterns and policies have changed in accordance with the political values of the time. The White Australia Policy, for example, was introduced in 1901 as the *Immigration Restriction Act*. Although it was modified from the late 1950s, it was not abolished until 1973. Currently, in line with economic trends, there is an emphasis on skilled and business immigrants. In 1999–2000, the Humanitarian Migrant Program accounted for 7,267 places out of a total number of 92,000 immigrants (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 2000). Many of the 7,267 immigrants had suffered gross violations of their human rights.

At present, because of the tragic situations in so many countries around the world, Australia is grappling with the demand for immigration from asylum seekers and refugees. The term 'asylum seeker' describes someone who is seeking protection in Australia and is awaiting a determination of their status for residency. A refugee is someone who:

... owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

UNHCR in Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc 1998, p 22

In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, immigrants to Australia were predominantly Anglo-Celtic, and they remain dominant politically, economically and socially, though the situation is changing. In the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of people came from a variety of countries all around the world. Over the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of people from South East, North East and Southern Asia settling in Australia. Most recently there has been an increase of arrivals in Australia from the former Republic of Yugoslavia, the former USSR, the Middle East and Africa.

Migration also involves people leaving Australia permanently. For example, in 1998, there were between 40,000 and 50,000 people who left Australia either long term or permanently (source of data: Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner 1997).

The issues explored in this section relate to different groups of students who are from non-English-speaking backgrounds. We have chosen to use this term in preference to 'culturally and linguistically diverse' because it is a more, though still not completely, accurate description. Although some of the issues do relate to students from non-English-speaking backgrounds generally, they more specifically refer to those who are:

- having trouble negotiating their way between two often very different cultures;
- recently arrived immigrants; or
- asylum seekers and former refugees.

The period of transition from living in one country to living in another is inevitably stressful, even if the choice to migrate was a positive and freely chosen one. However, the majority of people are adept at coping with change and, given time and support, will adjust to a new environment. Schools can be very important in positively influencing this adjustment, and therefore influencing the social and emotional health of both students and their parents or care givers. Schools can be a safe haven from the possibly negative feelings of the community, providing a trusting and trusted environment with which people can identify and belong.

How people cope with moving to Australia can depend on a number of variables, such as whether:

- the people can communicate in English;
- the move resulted from war or other trauma;
- the length of time spent in immigration detention (people held for less than three months have significantly better mental health outcomes);
- the destination was chosen or allocated;
- Australia is perceived as welcoming or not;

'Religious and spiritual beliefs can be linked to causes of mental illness, and in some cases influence the treatment ...'

*Bakshi, Rooney & O'Neil
1999, p 3*

- appropriate employment and housing are accessible;
- support networks exist;
- family and friends are in the community;
- work or school environments are supportive;
- core values are discrepant between home and new country.

Recently arrived asylum seekers and refugees have specific needs, including coping with very traumatic experiences.

The publicity surrounding asylum seekers in Australia has been intense and negative, with an image of Australia under siege from 'invading hordes' of people 'pretending' to be escaping from traumatic situations. In fact, in 2000 more than 90% of so-called 'illegals' from Iraq and Afghanistan were granted legitimate refugee status. The plight of people who arrive under the humanitarian program was highlighted in evidence given to the National Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness (HREOC 1993) by Professor Derek Silove.

WWW

National agencies

They are dispossessed, dislocated, they suffer psychological disintegration and they arrive in a country where they become disempowered. Ten to twenty percent of these people have been subject to formal torture and that's probably an underestimate, but almost all of them have been subjected to what we call 'organised violence' which is a World Health Organisation term to cover a wide range of trauma to do with civil unrest, dispossession, persecution by authorities, famine, war and other forms of violence carried out in societies that are disintegrating.

HREOC 1993, p 725

WWW

Health promotion

Schools need to be aware that people from some cultures may have a quite different understanding of health from the dominant one in Australia. Every culture has its own frameworks for mental health and for seeking help in a crisis. Ethiopians, for example, describe their usual cultural means of coping as 'active forgetting' (Burnett & Peel 2001). Some people believe that depression is not a mental problem, but a physical one. Mental illness can be so stigmatised that it is hidden within the family or community. The concept of counselling can be seen as so alien that it is not a realistic short-term option.

'Contributing factors such as the migration experience, cultural alienation, language barriers and loss of status in Australia were some of the examples raised as causes of mental illness.'

*Bakshi, Rooney & O'Neil
1999, p 3*

Connectedness and resilience

The most therapeutic event for a refugee child can be to become part of the local school community, to learn, and make friends, though there is always the possibility of bullying.

Burnett & Peel 2001, p 547

Identification with a culture and cultural practices can be a great source of strength for people, and this can particularly be so for people who have arrived in a new country, often after very difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences. Moreover, people who have endured great hardship can have a very large capacity for resilience.

Some cultures and communities may have had a range of inherent individual and community supports that do not exist in Australia (eg initiation practices, extended family supports), and this lack can be problematic. In some cases, young people do not even have any family members in Australia. Some have also lost all or most of their family members in the country from which they came.

There is an additional layer of complexity, with some cultures having practices that are not valued, or even illegal, in Australia. Examples of these are Female Genital Mutilation (FGM or female circumcision) and corporal punishment of family members, particularly girls and women. Both of these are illegal practices and knowledge of them becomes a mandatory responsibility for schools. This has implications for the role schools have in educating the immigrant community about Australian practices and laws.

- Ensure that staff are educated about possible sensitive cultural issues.
- Ensure that students, parents and care givers from all cultural backgrounds experience the school as a safe place.
- Ensure that the school consults with key community organisations and leaders on an ongoing basis.

The need to feel that things are under control is one of the major needs felt by asylum seekers and refugees. This has serious implications for schools, particularly as the young people usually have a background of minimal and/or fragmented education, and therefore the academic part of their lives is also out of control. Structure, predictability and consistency are very important in providing the secure framework these students need. Many of the young people will also be years older than their Australian peers, which can cause serious identity gaps between how they are seen in their families and communities and how they are seen at school.

- Ensure that English literacy is given a top priority in the school.

WWW

Resilience sites

ACTION

ACTION

Connectedness can obviously be a very real issue for recently arrived non-English-speaking students, particularly if there are no other students from a similar background in their class. In addition, because tensions can occur when parents and children adapt to new situations differently, the students may risk falling through the connective cracks.

ACTION

- Ensure that the school and classroom provide a structured and predictable environment.
- Ensure that the level and demands of the curriculum relate to actual capacity, and not just age.
- Ensure that up-to-date data is kept on the literacy status of parents and care givers, and that strategies are put in place to deal with this information.
- Provide face-to-face or telephone translation services at key times.
- Ensure that parents can safeguard their privacy by not having to rely on other community members to translate written language.
- Allow for alternatives to the usual parent meeting formats (eg in a community venue).

Communicating effectively with the families of non-English-speaking students is crucial in connecting them and their children to the school community.

Students can draw great strength from 'belonging' to a group who speak the same language and who have similar backgrounds, though some groups of students in a school may see this behaviour as exclusive. When seen this way, such behaviour can become a cause of conflict and must be dealt with. All students need to understand how alien the experience of living in a new, foreign-language country feels like. Moreover, the more open the staff and students are to cultural groups such as this, the less likely they are to remain exclusive. In extreme cases, where the situation is allowed to get out of control, the lack of connection to anything but 'the group' can lead to a gang mentality and possibly serious conflict. It is important for schools, in partnership with the community, to monitor situations like this very closely.

Loss and grief

Schools need to be sensitive to diverse cultures. This means that they need to know about them, particularly about matters that may impact on their students wellbeing.

A common experience soon after migration is a feeling of intense sorrow for all that has been abandoned or lost, with fear of the unknown, and profound experiences of loneliness, privation and helplessness.

Minas 1990, p 266

Learning to live in a new country involves huge challenges and these are more difficult to negotiate if there are communication difficulties involved. This can be experienced as loss of confidence and loss of a former sense of competence, particularly for adolescents and adults.

Young people who are negotiating their way between two cultures can suffer considerable feelings of loss and grief at possibly not being able, or not wanting, to fulfil the expectations of their parents and/or community. Arranged marriages are an example of this. They can experience grief at not being able to 'be the same' as other Australians.

Although people from non-English-speaking backgrounds generally have lower rates of suicide than the rest of the community (Commonwealth of Australia 2000a), some, particularly people who have survived torture and trauma, may be at increased risk of mental health problems.

- Take appropriate steps to involve cultural community groups in school and community partnerships, on an ongoing basis.
- Ensure that the school has appropriate referral procedures in place.

They have left circumstances that were intolerable and sometimes horrific, such as war, oppressive regimes, and even the experience of torture. Presettlement experiences have sometimes caused people to lose trust in systems of authority. This can make their access to services and support difficult, thereby adding to the stresses of isolation and living with unmet needs. People from such circumstances often experience post-traumatic stress disorder. There is associated stress involved for anyone who is living in the same family. The mental health consequences for traumatised students and their families are profound, and can include:

- passive forms of suicide, such as not eating;
- families becoming dysfunctional, so that students become homeless;
- parents having a reduced capacity to emotionally support and protect their children, so that the children can end up parenting the adult;
- family trauma continuing with ongoing bad news from 'home';
- distrust of people from the same country;
- distrust of anyone;
- guilt associated with leaving family behind.

List adapted from Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc 1998

WWW

Loss and grief sites

ACTION

'Culture shock is the loss of emotional balance, dis-orientation, or confusion that a person feels when moving from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one ... the basic cause of culture shock is the abrupt loss of all that is familiar, leading to a sense of isolation.'

Trudgen, Richard 2000, Why Warriors Lie Down and Die, Youth Research Centre, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc, Darwin, p 177



Dealing with Bullying and Harassment has strategies and activities.

WWW

Legislation

ACTION

WWW

Bullying and harassment sites

Students need support in settling down in a new, foreign country.

WWW

National agencies

Bullying and harassment

Harassment and bullying of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds manifests in a variety of ways, as it does for most students. It needs to be understood, however, that it is often motivated by racist attitudes and xenophobia ('fear of the foreign'), and also that it can involve groups as much as individuals. Many of these new students look, dress and behave very differently from what most Australians are used to. People with a limited command of English are easy targets for harassment and bullying, which is commonplace, and can be aimed at groups and individuals. However traumatic the outcome might be, it is not surprising when groups of young people who are subject to continual harassment of this kind eventually retaliate.

- Ensure that these students are safe from bullying and harassment, including from any racist graffiti.
- Ensure that the school has strategies in place to firstly avoid, and then deal with, inter-group conflict.

An often unrecognised, but significant factor, is that young people from traumatic situations may have developed behaviours that draw attention and leave them open to bullying. These might be things such as hoarding food or having what appears to be an irrational fear of theft.

People do at times try to excuse harassment for political reasons. Recently arrived people from non-English-speaking backgrounds are commonly blamed for causing unemployment in Australia. This community attitude is reflected in schools. Without even entering into the moral and ethical humanitarian arguments, it does need to be recognised that immigration in fact stimulates the economy, creating jobs (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1998).

There is no doubt that racism, however it is expressed, exacerbates the stresses of immigration and trauma.

Action inventory

We have collected all the suggested strategies from this chapter into an 'action inventory', which is included as Appendix 8, pages 100–104.

This inventory has been organised under the overarching headings on which the whole student approach is based. These are:

- caring relationships
- opportunities for participation and contribution
- high but achievable expectations.

This approach is very useful because it accounts for all the protective factors. It allows schools to focus on what the needs are of all the diverse students in their school.

Within each of these headings we have used the three whole school approach classifiers. In this way, schools can work out how best to take action. They are:

- curriculum – teaching and learning
- ethos and environment
- partnerships.

Some of the ways the list has been organised are debatable. In fact, the actual classification process could be a very useful beginning professional development exercise for a school, providing a way for people to become familiar with some of the ideas. While some of the strategies are aimed at parents or staff, all of them can enhance protective factors for students.

Schools could:

- adapt the inventory for their school, by ensuring that the concerns of their students, parents and staff are addressed;
- use it as the basis for an ongoing professional development program;
- transform these often general strategies into practical action for their school, using a whole school approach;
- transform them into practical action for every classroom and for every teacher.



CM

Action inventory, p 100



mind
matters

SchoolMatters has audit tools for finding out the concerns of staff and parents.