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Students direct inclusive school development in an Australian secondary school: An example of student empowerment.

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Abstract

This paper reports on processes employed at a secondary state high school in Australia, where students directed inclusive school development. The procedures used in the study were developed from the Index for Inclusion and included a student forum; a student presentation to parents, principal and teachers and a focus group interview with members of the school community. These procedures were designed to empower students to participate in school review and planning and evaluate the procedures developed from the Index for Inclusion. Samples of interview data from the school principal, staff, parents and the students illustrate a growing understanding of what inclusive education means for members of this school community. The research extends understandings of inclusive education in schools, from a focus on students with disabilities to a much broader philosophy that influences school culture, policy and practice for the diversity of students at the school. Discussion about feeling part of a 'family' in the school community and the description of the procedures linked to actions for change, provide evidence of a developing inclusive school culture that will inform educators interested in inclusive school development.

In schools throughout the world, 'inclusion' has been used to refer to the placement of students with disabilities in ordinary classrooms alongside their peers (Kugelmass, 2004). Similarly in Australia, our understandings about 'inclusive education' have evolved from the notion of integrating students with disabilities into regular schools. It seems that in current times, the terms 'integration' and 'inclusion' are still confused and it is important to differentiate between the two terms. Integration is described as "the process of moving children from special education settings into regular classrooms where they undertake most, if not all of their schooling" (Ashman & Elkins, 1998, p.526). With integration, there is a focus on helping students with disabilities 'fit in' to the regular classroom. This is because the emphasis is on teaching the 'normal curriculum' and teachers must then consider modifications to meet the needs of students who have a disability. Therefore integration does not necessarily challenge the organisation and provision of curriculum for students. In contrast, an inclusive approach to schooling aims at empowering members in a school community to identify and dismantle actual and potential sources of exclusion that limit

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opportunities and outcomes for all students (Slee, 2003). It questions personal assumptions that structure views about schools, teachers, students, teaching and learning; and the interconnectedness between individuals, education and society (Crebbin, 2004; Smith, 1998). Inclusive education is striving to achieve a way of life in schools where people are valued and treated with respect for their varied knowledge and experiences (Carrington, 1999; Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Moss, 2003).

The inevitable presence of difference among students means that schools need to become more comfortable with building inclusive communities that value diversity. In Barton's words, "difference is now to be viewed as a challenge, a means of generating change and an encouragement for people to question unfounded generalisations, prejudice and discrimination" (Barton, 1997, p.235). Theories dealing with democratic community (Dewey, 1916) provide opportunities to rethink how we can improve acceptance of difference and create communities inclusive of all members of society (Turner & Louis, 1996). For example, an inclusive learning community should foster collaboration, problem solving, self-directed learning, and critical discourse (Skrtic, Sailor & Gee, 1996). Separation or stereotyping differences creates divisions and status systems that detract from the democratic nature of the community and the dignity of the individuals. Communities in inclusive schools cooperate and collaborate for the common good of all (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Considering these ideas, it is not surprising that inclusive education has become well rooted in the general education reform agenda (Roach, 1991) because both areas incorporate school change and improvement (Fisher, Sax, Rodifer & Pumpian, 1999). In Queensland, Australia, the School Improvement and Accountability Framework, Policy and Guidelines assist state schools to contribute to the delivery of educational services within the context of their local community and in accordance with the government's policy of strengthening communities. As one component of the School Improvement and Accountability Framework, Policy and Guidelines, the Triennial School Review process focuses on student achievement by ensuring continuous quality improvement and enhanced accountability. The Triennial School Review also provides an enhanced opportunity to involve key stakeholders in assessing the school's performance (Education Queensland, 2002).

Research on effective schools is increasingly addressing the ways that school staff can develop policy and practice to effectively meet the diverse needs of children. Recently, there has also been an increased focus on student voice in school review and development (Levin, 1994; Raymond, 2001; Silva, 2001; Soohoo, 1993). Kris Holm, the principal at the school discussed in this study, was particularly keen to involve students in the process of review and future planning. She believed that students' views are lost in the business of school improvement and noted that they are rarely thought of as active participants in the Triennial School Review process in Queensland schools. She stated, "students are a vastly under-utilized resource. Not only must they be a part of the solution – sometimes they have better ideas for solutions!"

This paper reports on processes drawn from the Index for Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, Black- Hawkins, Vaughn, & Shaw, 2000) employed at a secondary state high school in Australia, where students directed inclusive school development as part of a Triennial School Review. This work used The Index for Inclusion as a tool to engage students in conversations about issues of exclusion and inclusion. The Index process is promoted in Education Queensland as an effective tool for developing school community and for school review and development in the areas of culture, policy and practice. We will now move to a description of the school; the method of Participatory Action Research; the participants in the study; the procedures used in the school review and planning process; and reporting and analysis of data. Finally, the validity of the empowering process will be discussed in the context of creating an inclusive school community.

Method

The Secondary School

Cotton Tree State High School (pseudonyms used throughout the paper) is situated close to the heart of what is a rapidly developing regional hub in Queensland, Australia. Overall student enrolment is 468 students from a diversity of backgrounds. The school has a special education unit supporting 33 students who have a range of disabilities including intellectual disability, autistic spectrum disorder, physical impairment and speech language impairment. 3.5% of the student population are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and only 3.4% of families indicate that they speak a language other than English in their home (Filipino, Portugese, Russian, Spanish and Indian). Student learning outcome data from both primary feeder schools and the high school indicate the need for a different approach to engaging learners. This school provides a genuine caring, socially just environment through effective and open communication within the total school community.

Approach

Participatory Action Research is concerned with issues "of power and powerless" and "is enacted through lived experience of people" (Reason, 1998, p.269). Reason highlights two aims of this approach. The first is to create knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, in this case a school community; and second to "empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their knowledge" (p.269). This approach assumes collaboration grounded in democratic values where participants are involved in planning, data gathering, analysis, and setting agendas. Due to the nature of this approach "the emergent processes of collaboration and dialogue" "empower, motivate, increase self esteem, and develop community solidarity" (Reason, 1998, p.271-272). As a consequence, the process of Participatory Action Research leads to new ways of working and creates new knowledge, understandings and meanings for those people involved. By challenging the status quo, participants interrogate and have the opportunity to alter the arrangements of schooling that perpetuate systemic inequalities for students and staff. Participants need time and support to learn new meanings and implement new practices because they have been immersed in the status quo and built their understandings and expectations of schooling from that experience (Crebbin, 2004).

Participants in the Study

A traditional Student Council at Cotton Tree State High School was evolving into a strong and committed Student Management Team. This team consisted of approximately 35 students from years 9 -12 and was growing to ensure students had an active voice in developing and refining school policies and procedures. The students in the Student Management Team were invited to participate in the study. Students in this group were students from grades 9-12 in the school who expressed interest rather than the popular students or the best in academic learning or sport. The students, in general, represented the diversity in the student population at the school. For example, there were students involved in the Student Management Team who received support for learning difficulties and/or had English as a second language. Unfortunately, there was no representation from students receiving support from the Special Education Unit in this study, however, students from the Special Education Unit were involved in the second study using visual narrative techniques to support inclusive school development (Carrington, Allen & Osmolowski, in process). In

addition, the school principal and members of the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee made up of 4 parent and 3 teacher representatives agreed to be interviewed for the research study.

Procedures, Data Collection, Data Analysis and Discussion

The ongoing conversations and practices associated with the collection and review of data in this study can be described as cyclical because collecting and reporting data informs cycles of review, development and data collection. This approach reflects the action research cycles described in the Index for Inclusion (Booth et al., 2000). The approach acknowledges that new issues may emerge and develop during the study and mirrors the complexity of working in school environments. For these reasons, procedures, reporting of data, analysis of data and discussion are not presented in this paper in a traditional manner.

The procedures used to empower and involve students in the school review and planning process involved a Student Management Team Forum; Student Management Team Presentation to Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee; and Student Management Team – Focus Group Interview with the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee. These processes will be described in more detail.

Student Management Team – Forum. The first author wrote to the Student Management Team (see Appendix 1) inviting them to participate in a process that would make a difference in their school community. A set of 10 statements were key to the process and focused on elements of school culture and support for students.

Statements
1. In most lessons, students and teachers behave well towards each other.
2. Opinions of students are sought about how the school might be improved.
3. Students are confident that their difficulties will be dealt with effectively.
4. Students share responsibility for helping to overcome the difficulties experienced by some students in lessons.
5. When you first joined this school you were helped to feel settled.
6. Students worry about being bullied at this school.
7. Students are taught to appreciate people who have different backgrounds to their own.
8. Teachers try to help all students do their best.
9. At lunchtime there are places in the school where students can go to be comfortable.
10. When students have problems with their work they ask the teacher for help.

There was no specific mention of 'inclusive education' at this stage of the process, however the notion of a Cotton Tree 'family' is one that is embedded in the school ethos, implying care and respect for everyone in the school community. The 10 statements were drawn from The Index for Inclusion dimensions: culture, policy and practice. Thirty-five students from grade 9-12 from the Student Management Team received the letter and statements the week before the scheduled meeting and agreed to participate in the study.

Thirty-five students met with the first author in a designated meeting room at the school for three hours. The room was an open space catering for group discussion. Once the school principal conducted introductions and endorsed the value of student involvement in school review and development, she departed to enable free and open discussion between the first author and the student group. Initial protocols were established of value and respect and an expectation that students could contribute without judgment in the process. Students

received a sheet of paper with the same ten statements sent in the previous week. Each sheet of paper had a coloured dot in the corner of each page so that five cross-age groups could be formed with seven students in each group. Each group was asked to discuss each statement and vote to record an answer: yes - we agree; we are not sure; or no - we do not agree, on a recording chart for each statement posted on the wall. Students were also asked to record any comments from their discussion on sticky notes that were posted on the recording charts. This process took approximately one hour and produced high quality debate and discussion between members of the five groups. Students in grade 9 had surveyed the grade 8 students in the previous week and were able to contribute these opinions to the meeting. At the completion of this first stage, there were 10 charts illustrating the responses (votes) and comments on each statement. Students were interested to take the time to browse and discuss the groups' responses. After a short break for morning tea, the group reconvened with the first author facilitating a review and collation of the data. One student acted as scribe in this second stage of the process while other students participated in enthusiastic discussion. Data was recorded in a format that clearly indicated which issues were of concern or strength in the school community. For example, if 4 out of 5 groups voted 'no- we do not agree with Statement 1: In most lessons, students and teachers behave well towards each other, then this would be recorded as a concern. The Student Management Team analysed the data in collaboration with the researcher and decided which issue was a concern and which was a strength. Students were then asked 'what actions need to occur?' The focus was not on 'what needs to be fixed', rather the focus was to acknowledge and continue the successes and address the issues of concern (see Table 1).

Table 1
Student Management Team Forum, Data and Planning

Statements	Strength / Concern	Action
1. In most lessons, students and teachers behave well towards each other	Concern	- Split gender classes in some subjects. - We need to learn to interact with each other. - Seating plan. - Reinforce teacher student relationship. - Revisit code of behaviour (Student Management Team to review and rewrite)
2. Opinions of students are sought about how the school might be improved.	Concern	- Representatives to go to Teacher Management Meeting to make sure the right information is getting told. - Participate in a range of meetings – Parents and Citizens and Triennial School Review.
3. Students are confident that their difficulties will be dealt with effectively.	Concern	- Students should be made aware of their options, where they can go for help. - Set time in class for students to raise

		concerns.

4. Students share responsibility for helping to overcome the difficulties experienced by some students in lessons.	Strength	• No action needed here.
5. When you first joined this school you were helped to feel settled.	Concern	• After a yr 8 entry students find it harder to find themselves. • Extend workshop and camps to form stronger support groups and friendships. • Older grades have friendship building activities. • Student volunteer to help new students. • A book of hints made by Student Management Team to give to students in yr 7 (e.g. have information on peer mediation process) • Buddy system but do not force people.
6. Students worry about being bullied at this school.	Concern	• Continue peer mediation, raise awareness about what they do – needs publicity about this. • Give students information book in yr 8. • Focus on teaching about bullying in yr 8 & 9. • Acknowledge the issues -bullying still exists in upper school but it is subtle.
7. Students are taught to appreciate people who have different backgrounds to their own.	Concern and Strength	• Treat everyone as equals-needs to be more embedded in teaching. • School expectation is a strength and needs to continue.
8. Teachers try to help all students do their best.	Strength and Concern	• Included in Action for Statement 1.
9. At lunchtime there are places in the school where students can go to be comfortable.	Concern	• More seating (all year levels). • Yr 12s need a place to eat lunch so young grades do not feel intimidated near tuckshop.
10. When students have problems with their work they ask the	Strength and	• Most teachers do their best to help. • Students tease other students for

| teacher for help. | Concern | asking questions. |
| | | • Sometimes students are embarrassed to ask questions. This needs to be addressed. |

Student Management Team Presentation to Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee. Representatives from the Student Management Team presented the issues and the range of actions from Table 1 to the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee (school principal, teaching staff representatives, students and members of the school community including parents of students attending the school). Staff and parents were impressed with the mature insights and suggested actions proposed by the student group. In many areas, it was noted that students had recorded positive responses to statements but voted to record that there are still concerns and room for improvement. For example, in Statement 2: The opinions of students are sought about how the school might be improved - two groups agreed and three groups disagreed. It was acknowledged that students had been included in choice of a new school uniform but could be involved more in discussion and planning for the school. In Statement 5: When you first joined this school you were helped to feel settled - two groups agreed, two groups said not sure, and one group said no. The recorded comments on the sticky notes indicated that 75% of yr 8s agreed, however it was also noted that it is more difficult if a student moves to the school after grade 8, because friendship groups are formed. The Student Management Team suggested a number of student driven ways to assist the welcoming of new students in different grades. For example, the office could liaise with the Student Management Team in the organization of a welcome committee, buddy, and provide information about processes and policies at the school. Student Management Team representatives who attended the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee Meeting, were congratulated by school staff and parents for their enthusiastic presentation of issues and ideas for actions. The school principal, teachers and parents were supportive of the recommended actions.

Student Management Team – Focus Group Interview with the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee. Following the successful report by the students to the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee and the great enthusiasm demonstrated by the students in the process of review and planning for the Triennial School Review, the first author facilitated a focus group interview designed to collect data from the school principal, teacher representatives, students, and a parent representative on the value of the process. All participants agreed to participate in the focus group interview and to the recording and transcription of the interview for research purposes.

The school principal, four staff, five students and a parent representative met in the school library. Participants were seated in a circle. The first author facilitated the focus group interview while an additional school staff member organized the audio recording equipment. The audio-tape was later transcribed for analysis. The facilitator asked the following questions:

Students
1. Why is it important for student teams to be involved in a school review and planning process?
2. Tell me why you valued the process used with the Student Management Team using the questions and group discussion.
3. How does this change your thinking about your time and involvement at Cotton Tree SHS?

Parents
1. How do you see your involvement in the Triennial School Review Facilitating Team influencing school development at Cotton Tree SHS?
2. Has the Index process been useful?

General
1. How will the school community know that the process has been successful?
2. What forms of partnership in a school community are helpful?

Once interview data were transcribed, the first author indexed sentences, phrases, paragraphs to make them manageable for interpretation. The aim of the indexing was to bring together extracts of data collected under a particular category (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The process of indexing then involved reading and re-reading the text and assigning index codes (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). The categories of Family, Validity of Empowerment, Action for Change, and Evidence of Inclusive Schooling were indexed with a number of index codes. The categories and index codes are presented in Table 2 and described in more detail with inclusion of quotes from the Focus Group Interview participants.

Table 2.
Index categories and index codes

Index Categories ⇒	Family	Validity of Empowerment	Action for Change	Evidence of Inclusive Schooling
Index Codes ⇓	Description of feeling of belonging	Valued contributions	Benefits to students themselves	Respect for others
	Relationships	Pride in school	Benefits to school community	Special education unit
		Students as citizens rather than as tourists.		Understandings of inclusion

Family. This category encompasses the feeling of belonging to a group that cares for each other. The focus is on the value of relationships between people in the school. The principal's established school ethos of valuing student voice was enhanced by the Student Management Team Forum and the presentation to the Triennial School Review Facilitating Committee and provided further opportunity for improved relationships with school principal, staff and parents.

Description of feeling of belonging

Students commented a number of times about the growing feelings of belonging to the school community and valued the opportunities created through the Forum process. For example, Roy said, "it makes us feel like we belong to the school and that we are part of it, and that we have something to say that can get across and be listened to." "It makes us feel like that we are, like [the school principal] has told us since we first came, that we're family. And the more she involves us in decisions that get made, the more we feel like we are part of a family," Maree added.

Relationships

The Forum process highlighted "relationships between teachers and parents and students and teachers and everyone like, just getting to know each other", Madison explained. Roy thought that if the process continued on a regular basis, "it's got to build a strong relationship within the school, between the teachers and students – everyone basically." The family spirit ensured that people in the school knew each other on a different level that is frequently not evident in secondary schools. This difference is illustrated in Madison's comments: "Everyone is involved in everyone's life." "It is really interesting because you know what they are going to do when they leave school, you know about them." Maree added, "we've got a family spirit," and clarified Madison's comments in saying, "We're not nosey people…it's not because we get into each others business, it's that we trust each other."

Validity of empowerment. This category highlights the value and respect for student voice in the school community. We would argue that data presented in this category, supports our point that empowering students within an inclusive school culture, develops greater understandings that break down traditional teacher domination over students.

Valued contributions

The students expressed views about their involvement in the Forum process. Gay thought the process was wonderful. "We felt needed and wanted - that we do have an opinion". Roy continued by saying, "this process that we've done, let us know that we are important for the school." "I think it makes us feel like we are actually contributing", Maree said. Don, representing the parent body, said, "the students, in effect, not just in words, have ownership of how this place is progressing and this place is evolving. And this is an absolutely fabulous thing, and certainly never happened in my day…but it is wonderful to see ownership of the entire school, of policies and code of conduct…that the students actually are encouraged to build it."

Pride in school

Empowering the students to contribute to school review and future planning contributed to further development of pride in showcasing the school to future students and the community. Some students indicated their pride in wearing their school uniform. For example, Gay stated, "We are a proud family. Just a symbol that it makes us feel proud to be part of this school." "It's just an awesome achievement for us to be able to be involved and everything."

Students as citizens rather than as tourists.

This index code draws on the work of Freiberg (1996) with a focus on establishing collaboration and teamwork in a culture where students are treated as citizens and not as tourists. Students are encouraged to contribute in a meaningful way to a school community so that cooperation, participation and support are key factors. Maree explained that when she first began her schooling at Cotton Tree State High School, she thought, "you just come to school, you learn, you have a great time while you were here and then you go" in the same way tourists pass through a town community. The word "involvement" was mentioned a number of times by students and captured the change to becoming citizens in their school community. For example, Madison said, "we do get involved now that we have done that process [the Forum]. We have looked at a lot of stuff that could be improved in our school. And now we as a student body get to take the next step in helping. I mean, one of the big things was our behaviour - code of behaviour - the book. I mean, we didn't think it was a problem and then as a Student Management Team we sat together and thought about it and why is it a problem and how can we fix it. And we decided that we might be able to revisit it."

Action for change. This index category provides examples of change that occurred as a result of the empowerment process. If students are truly valued for their contribution, then change should be evident.

Benefits to students themselves

Student enthusiasm in participating in this process changed the way they viewed their time at school. Maree explained this by saying, "the way it's changed my time at this school is that I, when I was in grade eight, we never use to be involved in anything. I didn't really feel that I had to be here. By doing this type of thing you're getting involved, you want to learn because you are making the influence and you are changing the school. You want to learn, by being involved. I think it helps to learn a bit better, because you are helping." Madison agreed and said," when I came to this school, I didn't feel the need to make myself involved. I didn't want to be involved, I just wanted to come here, I didn't even want to come to here, I just wanted to go to school and get it over and done with. But now that we have only four and a half months left, I don't want to go." Don speaking from a proud parent perspective commented, "if you treat young people as children, they're going to behave like children. If you treat them as is here, like adults, then you will see the maturity and adult wisdom coming back to us, and I love the journey we are on here. I have been involved for five months, and I'm signed on for five years, because this is the most educative process I been involved with for years and years and years." In fact Don remarked, "there is such a maturity…in the student body that they play the role of parents if you like, in guiding the school."

Benefits to school community

Maree made it clear that the changes were not just going to benefit individuals but benefit the school and "the community around us." Gay added, "we know that we could come back in a few years time and know that we have helped improve this school in some way, by just going through these statements and these group discussions and helping the younger generations for their future and our future also." In the discussion about partnerships, Don indicated that the Forum process drawing on the Index for Inclusion had "focused the Parent and Citizens group on taking this school out into a broader community, beyond just the parent community. So that all the businesses and other political and commercial infrastructure in our catchment area, if you like and beyond, become aware of the school as an asset to our community. Both it's infrastructure and the quality of the students that are being produced

here, and we want them to become involved. The community is perhaps blissfully unaware of how much they're going to be included in this school from now on."

Evidence of Inclusive Schooling. Although 'inclusive schooling' was not mentioned initially, the concepts of respect and value for all in the school community were central to the school culture and the Student Forum process. The term 'inclusive' gradually became incorporated into discussion so that students, staff, and parents demonstrated a growing personal and collective understanding of what inclusive schooling meant at Cotton Tree State High School.

Respect for others

Rachel valued the Forum process because "everybody respected each other's opinions of what should and shouldn't happen in the school. And it was just a good way so we all knew what everyone was feeling." Maree extended this further by saying, " it's not like we have cool groups and uncool groups and that sort of thing. Of course you have people that are interested in music and football players and stuff. But, everyone gets on with everyone. And everyone treats each other as if their just equal."

Special education unit

"The special ed unit kids know your name and who you are. And that just amazes me because it makes you feel like they take time out of their day to know who you are, and you know who they are. And it's not like their treated as outcast people…I think here that, if we treat them like that, then they walk into the world and think that they're like that, and know that they are accepted. We are all accepted and we're all equal, and we don't just outcast people because of their past and what they have done, and the mistakes they have made." (Maree)

Understandings of inclusion

Don explained that he thinks "it is the sense of family that is the inclusion. You don't necessarily love everything about everybody who is in your family, but you accept them. And that's the way it is in this school. We know there are people with certain difficulties and constraints and opportunities, dare I suggest, but they are accepted. And that's an absolutely fabulous thing. The parents have been made to feel wonderfully involved in this whole process."

Discussion

In the introduction to this paper, inclusive education was said to involve listening to the voices in a school community and *empowering* all members to develop an approach to schooling that is committed to identifying and dismantling actual and potential sources of exclusion (Slee, 2003). Roger Slee's choice of the word *empowering* is a term that until recently we have not questioned. Indeed it is a word that has been used frequently in this secondary school project to describe a process of including student voice in school review and development. However, we must admit that the word empower has been used without any real contemplation of deeper assumptions and meanings about relationships of power in schools that are striving to be more inclusive. The word empower is defined as 1. to give or delegate power or authority to, and 2. to give ability to; enable or permit (Collins English Dictionary, 1991). This definition implies that we must consider a superordinate and a subordinate group

or individual in the relationship (Scheurich, 1997) and that something is given away by someone who has power to someone who has not (Gore, 1993, 1997). These assumptions may dangerously provide an additional unintentional mechanism of control (Fielding, 2001) that works against the principles of inclusive education. For example, Fielding poses nine clusters of questions that probe the authenticity of encouraging the voice of young people in school settings. Under the heading of Speaking, he asks "Who is allowed to speak?", "To whom are they allowed to speak?", and "What are they allowed to speak about?" Fielding's questions provide an element of caution against the possibility that "hearing the voice of relatively powerless people gives relatively more powerful ones a management tool with which to control them" (Griffiths, 2003, p.84).

This is interesting, considering traditional pedagogy has been critiqued for its function in the reproduction of existing societal power relationships and structures through content and method (Freire, 1973; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Freire suggests that empowerment occurs only through praxis, meaning that one person cannot empower another but can create the conditions that make it possible for others to act and participate in valued ways. The processes described in this project of enabling secondary school students to obtain a greater measure of power in their lives was conducted in the context of a school culture built on value and respect. Although it is difficult to avoid the power dichotomies of teachers as leaders and students as followers, we believe teachers and students at this school were encouraged to develop relationships based on mutual respect. Roger Slee reminds us that "empowerment assumes substantive changes in relationships" (1994, p.161). Furthermore, the school culture and processes described in this study ensured that there were genuine opportunities for student voice with a 'fit audience' that engaged with the speakers by challenging, probing, arguing and perhaps expanding on the issues to ensure that a real difference can be made in the future (Griffiths, 2003).

So, is this an example of empowerment? Are the students at this school really exercising some form of authority in schools and directing school development that could be described as more inclusive? We believe we have provided examples of data illustrating involvement, ownership and commitment to defining the process and direction of change for a more inclusive school. However, it is the future action of students, staff and community that will truly validate the process. We are also aware that the participants in this study represent only a small part of the school community and these people chose to participate in the Triennial School Review Process. How will the ideas for change identified by the student group be received by other members of the school community? These are questions yet unanswered and we need to remember that in a school organisation, webs of power maintain and are maintained by the status quo. Power functions in and between all of the different levels of relationships and meaning making (Foucault, 1980). We are aware that the student goals for education reform and change need to acknowledge but not concede to traditional roles, relationships, expectations and meanings within a school community. "Schools are sites of both domination and contestation as different kinds of power are continuously mobilised to fulfil different expectations and purposes. Whether they are aware of it or not, teachers, students, parents and administrators are all actors and participants in these ongoing negotiations of power and of meanings." (Crebbin, 2004, p.197)

It was noted in the description of participants in this study that there was no involvement from students who received support from the Special Education Unit, but there was involvement in the second study (Carrington, Allen & Osmolowski, in process). Indeed, if this school is working to achieve a more inclusive approach to culture, policy and practice, we may ask what place is there for a "Special Education Unit"? A traditional approach of categorising, segregating and providing special support for students who have a disability reflects a paradigm in conflict with the notion of inclusive education. Despite the fact that the

school described in this study is well on the way to developing an inclusive view of student diversity, staff believe that the complex social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs of students with disabilities still require specialist staff and specialist facilities. However, it is important in this school review and development process to consider how staff and students are excluded in a traditional special education style. There are a number of changes already in progress to address these concerns. All of the students who have a disability are now included in classes with their peers and have a range of support personnel depending on the individual student's needs. In addition, many teachers at Cotton Tree State High School have developed new skills in teaching and recognise the value of working collaboratively to support the learning of all students in their classrooms. Further progress towards a more inclusive culture has already been achieved by including the special education teachers in regular staffrooms rather than in a segregated "special education" staffroom. It could also be feasible to take the label of 'Special Education Unit' away because language can be a powerful tool in moulding people's attitudes. These changes illustrate the growing understanding at Cotton Tree State High School that young people with disabilities and indeed the specialist staff that work with them, are not a 'separate' part of the school community.

Conclusion

We do not want the goal of creating a better school for everyone to become too complex and unattainable (Carrington & Robinson, in press). This study highlights that the insights of the students themselves can help us break down our assumptions, values and meanings that are blocking progress to achieving more socially just schools. This is because the social relationships that develop through this process are the catalyst for learning in less bounded and more community focused ways (Mallory & New, 1994). Involving students in future quests for more inclusive school development can only broaden our understandings of inclusion and more importantly exclusion in our secondary schools. A staff member at Cotton Tree State High School reminds us that: "schools are a living, breathing organism… it is the people that make schools, not the buildings and things. Ii is what goes on within them…but we'll know that we have been successful, when everybody is moving forward and moving forward together. So for me it's a feeling."

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Appendix 1

<u>Cotton Tree State High School</u>

<u>Student Management Team</u>

Dear Students,

Hello. My name is XXXX and I will be working with you on Monday morning. Your group has a wonderful opportunity to consider some important issues that will make a difference in your school community. Please consider the statements on the next page. I encourage your team to discuss these statements with your peers this week. You will be asked to respond to each statement in the following ways:

Yes (we agree)
Not sure (we can't decide)
No (we disagree)

There will be an opportunity for you to provide some extra information as part of your answer. For example if students want to make a comment about an issue that is related to the statement, I will have sticky notes available that we will collate for each statement. This will ensure you are able to represent a broad range of views in the meeting on Monday morning. The process on Monday will be collaborative and cooperative to ensure that there is time for you to discuss the questions and provide feedback. Part of the process on Monday will involve collating the feedback so that as a group you will be able to establish what is working well in your school and what areas are of concern. The process will involve your group brainstorming ideas for future development and action in the school that will better meet students' needs. I am sure you will all have a lot to say…which is great! However, to ensure we use the time effectively I will facilitate a process that will require all of us to be respectful of each other and our different points of view. I am looking forward to working with all of you on Monday!