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TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER & ABORIGINAL VIEWS.

INTERVIEW WITH MR. GEORGE LUI

Coconut Island,
Torres Strait.

Mr. Lui is a school teacher at Coconut Island, and has been teaching in the Torres Strait Islands for ten years. Mr. Lui thinks it is important for the parents and the other people in the community to be interested in the school, and in this interview he talks about ways in which he works at Coconut Island to get the school and the community together.

Professor Watts -

Mr. Lui, what are some of the things that you do at Coconut Island to bring the school and the families close together?

Mr. Lui -

This is very important. The first place to start is with culture; cultural studies is one of the things these parents will be happiest to cope with in the children's education. From my point of view it is important that the parents be ready to accept the challenge that they are able to assist their kids. Some of the parents are not interested, but the only thing that we want is to pass on the message of education to them. If they really understood what we wanted to do they would help us in time.

What is it that you think education can do for the children on the island?

Well, it is important for better communication. I believe that English is the only language that will help the people go and do the things they wish to do, get good jobs and that sort of thing. Education also helps them to be better people in the years to come.

Do the parents at Coconut Island come up to the school at all?

Well, we've tried this, but some of them are a bit too scared about coming along. We have tried to encourage them by telling them little points about their own kids; and if they wish to see their kids they can come along and have a look at the school. But some tend to feel that education is something that they are not quite used to, because it's a white man's life. We've got to encourage them to trust in education and stick to it because it's the only thing that will help them to lead a good life.

As school teacher, Mr. Lui, do you go down into the village and talk to the parents about school?

Yes I do, because it's important. Let them get used to you at first. Then they can see that you've accepted their cultural way of doing things and they can feel that you could be part of them. So they'll put up with the school and they'll eventually come to feel that you belong to them. This way you'll get full support from the community. This is what I've discovered.

And, Mr. Lui, what about where there are white teachers teaching on the Islands, what advice would you give them so that they can get the community interested in the school?

Well I feel that what is important here is that they accept the people's cultural ways and habits so that the people can feel that the teacher is part of them. They would in turn help him in any way possible. Because this is the point, if the teachers are closing their eyes to the ways of the Islanders, well, there'll be a gulf between the Islanders and the teacher. So if you want them to learn, if you want them to be educated, please accept the ways and habits of their culture.

Are you from Coconut Island, Mr. Lui?

I was brought up at Coconut Island. My dad, a teacher, had moved there to take up a position.

Sometimes in the Islands, there are Islander teachers or European teachers who don't belong to that island; they don't know the culture of those people. If they talked to the older people, would the older people be happy to come up to the school and talk about culture to the children?

Well, I think yes - yes, they would. If the teachers did that, I think the older people would really accept them. But you see, these young people now have an easier life and they tend to push away the ways of their culture, because they are trying to adopt a modern way of life. But I think there's still some bits and pieces which could well be taught because culture is one of the things that keeps the community moving.

And, Mr. Lui, which are the important bits and pieces?

Well, some think that one of them is taking pride in being an Islander.

What would Islander people like education to do for their children?

Well, they want to have a better standard of living, and they want to share in education so their kids may be able to take a position in all sorts of things, especially in taking control of the Islands themselves. This is what they are trying to do, and they hope that the kids will be able to set up all sorts of things.

Mr. Lui is going to talk again about culture and the parents being interested.

To get the parents interested, well, some of the parents will come up making comments on their children. Now this is one of the things you have to watch for because it's important. Even though the parents aren't very well educated, they are very interested in their children's education. So if you take the opportunity when they come up to the school, to help the parents with a problem, then at some time later you will find the parents helping you in return. So please help when a parent needs help.

Did you start a newspaper at Coconut Island, Mr. Lui?

Yes, it has been started, and it's working pretty well at the moment. The parents are quite happy about this. They read some of the stories and even their kids like some of the stories that we put in. There's a quiz for the parents to answer and put in an envelope and send back to school. It's a kind of a current affairs quiz, things done recently, something that comes on the radio, or something that happened last month, and I think it works. And the kids are quite happy with it too, and they keep on asking for more news. They ask, "Is there any news today?" and "What have you done with the news?" They used to come up and ask for it.

And how often does the newspaper go out?

Three times a week.

Is it all English, or in some Island language as well?

Well, we've used a simple form of English so that the kids, if their parents are in doubt, will be able to help them to read.

Do many of the Island schools do that?

Yes there are some schools that are trying this out.

Will you tell the people about your teacher training. Firstly, where did you go to school when you were small, and then what teaching training have you done?

When I was small I used to go to school at Coconut Island, as my father was a teacher, and after completing Grade 6, I took up Grade 7 through correspondence and then on to correspondence 8, and I stopped there. Then next, I took on part of the course at teaching training college. I had three years of training, and with this I felt more secure. My background was also a help to me: to follow the footsteps of my father who had been a teacher. I helped him a lot, although he has resigned now. Therefore my background got me close to education before I even started training, and I think this is very very good. Then the type of training I got has promoted me to a very good standard and I'm quite happy with it.

Would it be a good idea when there is a European teacher, if he asks the people if he could go and visit them at home and talk about the things he does at school with the kids?

I think it's good. But if this is so, the teacher, if he's a European, must have an Island teacher as an interpreter. This would make the community and the parents much happier. You see they're not completely comfortable speaking English, so if the white teacher himself goes around asking them questions or talking about problems, they won't be completely relaxed and happy. But if someone is there to interpret, this is where they will feel as though the Islander and the white are working together. This is when they will try to give what they can. I've seen this happen myself, where a European teacher has been talking to the parents,

but some of the parents haven't spoken out because they are too scared of talking. So I asked one of the local Islanders to act as an interpreter, and then the people gained enough confidence to be able to talk.

I'm sure our readers will find your comments most interesting. Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Lui.

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