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A CONFLICT OF CULTURES

*Bob Topping

Torres Strait Islanders are frequently characterised by other Australians as caught between two cultures. Evidence and speculation that the majority of Torres Strait Islanders have neither 'made it' in the white mainstream world nor live exactly and traditionally as their ancestors did, sometimes lead to the glib perceptions that Islander people are members of neither world and are caught somewhere between the two.

Implicit in this line of reasoning is the perception that the identity of Torres Strait Islanders in the contemporary world is an 'either/or' proposition - either Islanders must, in order to remain Islanders, remain totally traditional or they must, in order to survive at all, become totally assimilated into the dominant society. This erroneous and simplistic view of the choices open to Islander people ignores the value of the school in providing a cultural synthesis rather than a cultural replacement.

Attempts in the past often couched education for Islander Australians in terms of cognitive deficit or cultural disadvantage. These attitudes upheld the notions that minority group students lacked the intellectual capacity to handle schooling and that their cultural milieu lacked any rich environmental stimuli. Assimilation, then, became the operative word.

Torres Strait Islanders are the only indigenous Melanesians in Australia and racially and culturally they are different from Aboriginal Australians.

Thursday Island State High School is the only high school in Australia with a significant majority of Melanesian students. Nearly half of our population comes from 14 scattered outer islands in the Torres Strait, while the other students reside on Thursday Island and three nearby islands. Our community reflects a very interesting social mix - a legacy of the various ethnic groups that were attracted to Thursday Island for missionary service and for work in the pearling, bêche-de-mer and trochus industries around the turn of the century.

* Principal, Thursday Island State High School. Reproduced from *Education Statewide*, monthly newspaper of the Queensland Department of Education, May 1987.

Our student population is linguistically complex. The presence of three extant vernaculars, namely Kalaw Kawaw Ya (top western language), Miriam (eastern islands vernacular) and Torres Strait Creole create considerable cultural differences existing between the populations which constitute these speech communities. The presence of considerable numbers of Papuan immigrants in the Torres Strait and in our school further compounds the complexity. Standard Australian English is generally only spoken within the school setting, as Torres Strait Creole is the lingua franca.

The challenge of any school, especially a school in a geographically remote and cross-cultural setting is to devise and maintain a clear and coherent direction. Allaying stereotypes about living in the very far north and teaching black students is a common experience. More often than not it is the exotic and the singular cultural difference which receives the publicity and sometimes negative responses, rather than the successes and immense satisfactions of living and teaching in an area that is outside the regular mainstream.

Our school is a focus of both contact and conflict. Some value conflict is inevitable, as there are some aspects of Islander culture which are not compatible with the culture of schools. The Torres Strait Islander people are aware of the need for education to gain social and economic mobility, yet that very participation can constitute some threat to their cultural identity in the same manner as the impending tourism industry and television satellite systems. Our school has to synthesise these differences, and that depends to a large part on the school's aims and philosophies and in the teachers' abilities in translating knowledge and skills from one culture to another.

I believe we still have quite a way to go in responding to a changing political climate and in reconciling the future economic bases and self management patterns with our educational programs, and in synthesising the heritages, knowledge systems and learning styles of our different cultures. At the very least, however, our students are being provided with a sound education which will enable them to have a greater freedom of choice than they have had in the past. For some this will mean staying in the Torres Strait; for others it will mean moving elsewhere.

Those of us who hope to see the perpetuation of Torres Strait cultures as beautiful, alternative lifestyles in the midst of modern technological conformity must trust the ability of the Torres Strait communities themselves to remain different and Islander.

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