



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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SO YOU'VE BEEN APPOINTED TO A TORRES  
STRAIT SCHOOL:  
A THUMBNAIL SKETCH OF THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL  
CONTEXT OF TORRES STRAIT EDUCATION

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On the basis of my own experience as a teacher in Torres Strait from 1968-1972 and feedback from preservice teachers studying "Education in Torres Strait", I have decided to provide teachers and principals new to the region some background information on the context in which they find themselves. My position is that education is constrained by its present socio-political context which has been shaped by its past.

The socio-political context of Torres Strait education is vastly different from that of most other parts of Queensland and I believe that it is important that educators are aware of the context in which they are trying to work. While this awareness may have little to do with day to day teaching, it can have a lot to do with community acceptance of the teacher and with the teacher's relationships with students, parents, and community members. As such, it is a basis for cultural sensitivity - for understanding the origins of, and modifications to, cultural practices.

What follows is my brief condensation of the work of many others (Bani, Beckett, Singe, Sharp, Langbridge, Mullins, Passi, Griffin, Osborne, E., Topping, Kehoe-Forutan, Williamson, and Haddon) within a framework of five phases which, particularly in the latter stages, are somewhat blurred.

PRE-LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY, Before 1871

- The people of Torres Strait are Melanesian - village dwellers.
- They had oral cultures - Kala Kawaw Ya (top Western), Kala Lagaw Ya (near Western and Central, Miriam Mir (Eastern)).
- Travel between islands was greatly affected by weather - outrigger canoes were used for trading from Papua Nui Guini, via N-S and E-W trade routes.
- Kinship was very important. The teachers of genealogies and initiation were close relatives.

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- People belonged to their father's village but women could own land. Villagers were territorial on Murray, but based on clans on the other islands.
- Top Western and Eastern - the people were gardeners. Near Western - they were hunters and gatherers even though they knew about gardening. Central - they were traders. All fished and hunted dugong or turtle or both.
- There was a strong local identity based on village or home island (not pan-Islander).
- There were no hereditary chiefs, elders made secular decisions and zogo le (religious leaders) were very influential.

1606 Torres - noticed 'blacks, turtleshell masks and out-rigger canoes'.

1770 Cook - renamed some of the islands.

1788+ Weekly visits during the dry season of ships passing through.

1840s The Islanders on Murray, Darnley and Prince of Wales were used to Europeans:

Naval expeditions:

- searched for castaways,
- charted the region,
- were instructed to use fire power only to protect themselves, and
- ended in 1849.

So they had only limited impact on the Islanders.

Then came more trepangers and pearlers:

- iron and steel were eagerly sought by Islanders,
- a cash economy was introduced, and
- gardens and women were taken by force.

So, the trepangers and pearlers were very disruptive to Islander life and culture.

## 1860s

- 1863 - Queensland Government set up base at Somerset, the beginning of colonial rule, but it failed as "Singapore of the North", so it was shifted to Thursday Island (TI), in 1877.
- 1864 - Edwards at Darnley - gardens used at the point of a gun.

Population of Torres Strait estimated at between 4000 and 5000.

## EVANGELISATION/CIVILISATION, London Missionary Society, 1871 - 1904.

- 1871 - London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived and became the 'de facto government'.
- 1872 - Islands up to 60 miles from the coast were annexed to Queensland.
- 1877 - Thursday Island was set up as administrative centre.
- 1879 - Eastern and Top Western islands were annexed to Queensland.  
From 1873 - 1892 schools flourished under LMS at Darnley and Murray.
- 1884 - Native Labourer's Protection Act
- 1886 - Ex-Premier of Queensland - John Douglas was government resident on Thursday Island until he died in 1904:
  - he wanted fully qualified teachers on islands but only succeeded in getting Bruce on Murray (1892 - 1920s),
  - South Sea Islander teachers filled the gaps of absentee missionaries and often over stepped their rights, so he moderated their influence, and

- he saw Islanders as "capable of exercising all the rights of British citizens and ought to be regarded as such."

So, he rejected 1898 protectionist legislation until he died in 1904. Islanders immediately came under the Act and were treated as Aborigines from then.

- 1890s - Haddon anthropological expeditions.
- 1900 - Population about 3000.

### PROTECTIONISM, 1904 - 1960s?

- 1904 - The Act.

LMS waned until in 1914 it was taken over by the Anglican Church which (unlike LMS) permitted tombstone openings.

Some islands had white teachers during this period.

- 1920 - Population about 3000.

Torres Strait Creole had been introduced by South Sea Islanders (who worked the boats or were missionaries). This provided a valuable lingua franca for trade.

By 1903 some Islanders owned their own luggers - worked them for 3 days per week (Cash + Social Profit), but the Queensland Government was disappointed by loss of revenue during the depression, so tried to enforce a five day working week. The Islanders resisted - Maritime Strike of 1936 (only possible because of Creole + Luggers). The Premier had to visit. Islander grievances included:

- (a) government interference with their boats,
- (b) government teachers were too powerful,
- (c) wages, and
- (d) lack of trained doctors/teachers/nurses.

So, local councils were set up, wages improved. Then came World War II:

Men enlisted in the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion,

Another strike (1/3rd of white man's wages lifted to  $\frac{1}{2}$  wages),

Women of the outer islands were deserted,

Hammond and Thursday Islands were evacuated of civilians - the women went to Cherbourg or Cooyar.

In the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion men rubbed shoulders with white people for the first time and this opened up new horizons and strengthened their quest for equality with white Australians.

After World War II :

Pearling boom at first - many Islanders sought equality through work.

Some moved south and "came out from 'Under the Act'".

Paternalistic Department of Native Affairs removed those who were seeking better treatment for Islanders (e.g., power to sack the chairman as late as the 1970s).

Department was still controlling accounts, movements from island to island into the 1970s.

Population of Islanders (not all in Torres Strait) began to rise from the 1930s.

## ASSIMILATION 1960s - 1972?

- 1937 - First national moves towards assimilation, but war intervened. Official federal policy from 1951 was assimilation (Queensland was way behind this timetable, see above). Assimilation aimed to raise "them" to white standards, white values, use only English etc, while they lost their culture. It failed, but it raised hopes of equality). But, the Islanders until at least 1985 were receiving clear inferior education:

It was run not by Queensland Department of Education, but by the Department of Native Affairs and its successors. Only six islands had a qualified teacher, seconded as Head Teacher from the Department of Education.

They had inferior facilities, antiquated curriculum, sparse materials.

Islanders were prevented from attending secondary schools until 1964.

Teachers were only partly trained (if at all) until the 1970s.

Hence one road to equality, educational achievement, was not really available.

But there were a couple of positives before takeover:

Islander teachers created a natural link between home and the school.

Teachers although poorly paid had status in their home communities.

1964 - High School on Thursday Island opened to Islanders, only to Grade 10.

### WELFARE COLONIALISM 1973 ---

1973 - The beginning of the federal initiative of welfare colonialism with in-built tensions like fostering independence but economic dependence.

1973 - Bamaga High opens to Grade 12 (Orr and Williamson's paper (1972) is interesting in light of opinions open at the time).

1975 - "Border No Change", unified resistance to Federal Government's attempt to cede Torres Strait north of 10 degrees South to Papua New Guinea. It was successful. National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) set up.

1978 - NAEC draft policy for Federal Government. QATSICC guidelines for Queensland Department of Education.

- 1984 - Murray Island Land Case begins - still going. Challenges DOGIT (Deed of Grant in Trust) legislation and is based on traditional ownership, not yet recognised in Australian Law. In December 1990, court accepted traditional ownership but still has to rule on its acceptability within common law.
- 1984 - First of three workshops that led to Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Committee (TSIREC) policy on Education 1985.
- 1985 - Hand over of education from the Department of Community Services (ex-Department of Native Affairs etc) to the Education Department - locally known as 'takeover'. New schools on outer islands, all have qualified principals (two are Torres Strait Islanders), some qualified Islander staff and more are upgrading via RATEP.
- 1986 - Localisation, local island councils began to run their own islands, not DCS.

Some mainland Islanders returning to Torres Strait. Australia wide population of Islanders is about 15000.

- 1987 - First Grade 12s from Thursday Island State High.
- 1988 - Independence moves commence and continue.
- 1990 - Still appalling sanitation, health services and infrastructure (transport, communication and power supplies).

ICC pressures government and is planning economic development:

- artefacts (modern and traditional)
- fuel depot and vehicle security at Bamaga
- small scale tourism
- gardening for income and
- fisheries (cray, prawns, mackerel, barramundi farms).

ATSIC is up and running.

## EDUCATIONAL THEMES THROUGH THE FIVE PHASES

I see in the above selection and interpretation of events:

- Strong emphasis on oral language, but also early introduction of the written word under LMS.
- Early success of Islander students under LMS.
- Early and sustained interest in and acceptance of western education, although this was not universal.
- Islanders lost many rights and even a separate identity (officially acknowledged) in 1904, only in 1990 is it formally acknowledged in federal government titles.
- Acceptance that white teacher ('second government') was not to be challenged until at least the Maritime Strike, and again until the 1980s.
- Inferior education for Islanders until first 1964, then 1985.
- Like in 1936, 1985 Policy Statement sought "proper education". However, it also sought links between education and both culture and employment.
- Welfare colonialism - with all its weaknesses - has provided a framework for the Islanders to have a voice in their own education and this led to the TSIREC Policy Statement and many successes in their quest for proper education.

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