



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

PALM ISLAND WOMEN SPEAK OUT

* *Anne Keary*

INTRODUCTION

Education is a vital political concern to Aboriginal and Islander women. Despite common assumptions that Aboriginal and Islander families do not hold high expectations for their children's education, Aboriginal and Islander families do value education for their children and hold high educational aspirations for them. This general perception of Aboriginal and Islander parents' disinterest has to do with the mismatch between the education provided and the culture of their children. Palm Island women as community other - Mothers¹, for instance, show a deep concern about their own and their children's education. It is only by gaining a political vocabulary by which to speak that Palm Island women can begin to articulate the educational needs for their children. This voice emanates from their standpoint and speaks in their interests, and contests Anglo-Australian paternalistic models of education. This article will give voice to Palm Island women as they speak about their children's education and their own educational aspirations.

FINDING A VOICE

Some Palm Island women are finding a voice to express their opinions concerning education. One group of women want mainstream education for their children. These women express serious concern with the standard of education which is offered on Palm Island. Lower education standards serve to sustain the oppressive positioning of the Aboriginal and Islander population.

* Anne Keary lived and taught on Palm Island from 1988-1990. This is an excerpt from her M.Ed.(honors) thesis, James Cook University, 1992.

1. "Nurturing children in black extended family networks stimulates a more generalised ethic of caring and personal accountability among(black) women who often feel accountable to all the black community's children" (Collins, 1990, p.129)
2. All names are fictitious.

Palm Island women are concerned that their children are being set up for failure. Ida² a community elder, for instance, advocates that mainstream education should be taught in Palm Island schools:

The schools need the mainstream education to come in.
I stress this all the time at our education meetings.
They need the mainstream education.
The secondary school needs to have the better education too.
I've seen boys leave school and they can't even write their
names or spell, which is a shame.

At the same time these Palm Island women want education which is culturally appropriate. Sally, a community leader, argues that: "Education is very important, but it has be our style of education." By arguing for mainstream education these women unwittingly reinforce dominant western ideology, norms and controlling images. Firstly, because mainstream education is a powerful means of transmitting western cultural knowledge and value systems. Secondly, Palm Island children often fail to reach mainstream standards (Keary, 1990) which confirms the controlling image of the 'inferior deviant Aboriginal and Islander.'

However, by arguing for mainstream education these Palm Island women are arguing for access to power and the dominant political process. Ida talks about education and its connection to political control. She wants Palm Island children to gain the knowledge and voice necessary for self-determination:

Self-management has to come but we've got to push for
better education for our own children.
They'll never take their place in life if they're not educated.
In years to come, we'll have to be educated to take over this
island.
If they haven't got the education then they miss out.

However, for other Palm Island women the term education has a broader, more encompassing meaning than just the learning which is done at school. Catherine, a senior officer for the council, articulates her standpoint on education:

I think educating the children includes making them aware that there is another life, that here is not the be all and end all. It's home and I love it here. I'm not putting Palm Island down but I think it's to their advantage if they get a bit of outside experience and then they're more capable of coming back. Yeah, they can come back and contribute to their community and not only that, for their own personal development, to know what it's like to work outside and to know that when you get your pay packet you've got to budget your money because nobody out there is going to give me some bread and sugar if I run out. If I haven't got it I've got to wait until I get paid next week. What I mean by education is not just going to school and learning to read and write but just in every day coping with daily problems, things like that.

EDUCATION

Palm Island women's central role, historically and today, in family and community maintenance, cultural continuity, and political rebuilding has a pedagogical component to it in terms of 'teaching each other' as well as their men and their children.

In curriculum Aboriginal and Islander women and girls need more, better, and more realistic representation. For example, special support and resources need to be provided for girls of colour in mainstream education and public education programs which focus on topics such as health, AIDS, safety, drug education and so on. Palm Island women are clearly 'in charge' of their family and community, and they need education programs which will give them the knowledge so that they can make informed decisions about the changes they want to bring about in their community.

More realistic opportunities need to be made available to Palm Island women to further their education. Professionals and experts in particular professional and vocational fields could be made available as advisers for Palm Island women who want to take on business ventures and co-operatives. In consultation with Palm Island women, community-based courses such as skill-share could be endorsed, organised and expanded. The curricula of such courses would then meet the needs identified by the community. Adult education, distance education and tertiary education need to be made more accessible to Palm Island women who are geographically isolated. Programs such as RATEP (remote area teacher

education program), which would allow women to access tertiary education courses in their own community, could be made available on Palm Island. As well as offering mainstream subjects, RATEP could also offer subjects which focus on black women's issues such as black women's literature, issues in black women's health, education on Aboriginal and Islander communities, black women's studies, the black media.

Women's studies programs in academia also need to reevaluate and make changes to curricula. These programs are predominantly organised and taught by economically and socially privileged women. Women of colour from different cultures around the world increasingly have been writing about their experiences. Yet giving women's writings a public voice depends on how these writings are included in mainstream academic feminist studies. The issue of race and ethnicity is still largely excluded from or only has token representation in such courses.

de Lepervanche (1991 b) states that:

What I would like to see, particularly in women's studies, is some kind of resource where women everywhere can come in with their own experiences and their own ideas about feminism and contribute. Now, a lot of women have written from non-English speaking backgrounds and Aboriginal backgrounds—in marginal journals, in seminar papers. Some of these are available but it's very difficult to get hold of them readily, and to use them is very difficult. I think women's studies might look to this kind of resource centre where women can bring their experience, their work to share it with other women in privileged positions.

Women of colour need not only to write about their own experiences but to be repositioned from the margins to the centre through education. Women of colour must be encouraged to pursue academic careers which will enable them to re-vision the knowledge setting agenda with femininity, ethnicity and racial identity at the centre. Young men and women of colour unquestionably benefit socially and culturally from being taught by academics of colour.

The education system needs to be more aware of the issue of black cultural representation. A more inclusive mainstream curriculum is required. For example, English Language Arts (ELA) curricula could be more sensitive to the way in which Aboriginal and Islander, as well as other minority groups, constitute their own knowledge. An inclusive space could be provided in the mainstream curricula which encourages Aboriginal and Islander children to create their own texts; the 'real' incorporation of the growing body of Aboriginal and Islander texts into the mainstream curricula is essential. Aboriginal and Islander children, as well as non-Aboriginal and Islander children would benefit from the experience of writing and reading culture and history from a variety of discourses. Aboriginal and Islander children's texts must be valued, not patronised or romanticised.

Aboriginal and Islanders need to "write themselves", and in and of their own interests - political, educational, economic, cultural and so on. For example, government initiated reports and projects need to be more aware of the issue of black representation of Aboriginal and Islander culture. The 1986 Aboriginal Women's Task Force report: 'Women's Business', was one government initiated project which was aware of this need. Aboriginal women consulted with their own people to report about the way in which Aboriginal women perceive their world. However, this report was constrained by its textual representation (as with this article) which followed a government report mode. Aboriginal and Islander women need to become the researchers and teachers of and for each other so that they can theorise their own voice and research texts.

Aboriginal and Islanders, especially women, need to be encouraged by government media, arts and literacy boards to write about their history and way of life through their own self-determined textual representation. Much of the emerging Aboriginal and Islander texts at present appear to address a 'white' readership with the aim of furthering a better understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. These texts "operate within the shadow where the conditions of being Aboriginal were, and still are, constituted" (Larbalestier, 1991, p.78). As Afro-American feminist Bell Hooks (1991) comments, it is not black women's job to teach white women. Aboriginal and Islander authors require the licence to find and write their past and future in their own traditional and/or contemporary discourses.

CONCLUSION

Palm Island women have played a central role in maintaining the family, the community and black culture against incredible historical odds. Palm Island women's voice on issues such as education has always been there. But, it has been historically silenced behind collusive dominant discourses. Palm Island women are developing a voice and a politics of resistance to contest domination. Education is a vital component of this journey from silence to language and to actions and to change. As Catherine comments:

...I think women are really community leaders, they're the leaders in any community because they're there to fight for education, better education, everything for the families...They have a leading role in any community and they're more aware of what's happening, what's going on because of their role I suppose in the home, as mother, housewife. They have to be aware of what's going on, what's best for the family. So, you know they have a very strong role in the community.

REFERENCES

- Collins, P.H. (1990) *Black feminist thought*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- de Lepervanche, M. (1991) *Feminist theory series*. Sydney: ABC Radio Tapes.
- Hooks, B. (1991) *Feminist theory series*. Sydney: ABC Radio Tapes.
- Keary, A. (1990) *Deviance in the Aboriginal and Islander classroom*. Unpublished Master's Degree minor dissertation.
- Larbalestier, J. (1991) Through their own eyes: An interpretation of Aboriginal women's writings. In G. Bottomley, M. de Lepervanche, & J. Martin (Eds.). *Intersexions : Gender/class/culture/ethnicity* (pp.75-91). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.