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.

Cutting A Better Deal For Torres Strait Islanders

Martin N. Nakata
James Cook University of North Queensland

Introduction

In the Torres Straits, the cultural agenda, along with the push to move away from English as the language of instruction, has not been met with uniform enthusiasm by all Islanders. For many there has been a growing sense of disquiet and continuing frustration about the preoccupations with liberal humanist agendas in Islander education, and the ongoing low levels of educational outcomes (Nakata, 1994a; Nakata, Jensen and Nakata, in prep.). As interesting as the writings in education (Orr and Williamson, 1973; Finch, 1975; Langbridge, 1977; Orr, 1977, 1979; Osborne, 1979; Cunnington, 1984; Kale, 1987, 1988; Castley and Osborne, 1988; Castley, 1988; Williamson, 1990) are to some people, they contribute little towards an understanding of our difficulties as we, Torres Strait Islanders, experience schooling, and thus contribute little towards a platform for improving our current or future educational outcomes.

As has been pointed out to me over and over, criticising is well and good but then what? First, I became very unsettled about how Torres Strait Islanders were represented in the literature, and I then became very unsettled by the deployment of the cultural agenda in the national education policy on Indigenous people (Nakata, 1991a; Luke *et al.*, 1993). It did not take long for some to realise that the Western or academic standpoint predominated in the literature even whilst it purported to represent Islanders (Nakata, 1993a). When I looked at my own writing I saw the same error: an adherence to academic perspectives on Islander characteristics and predicaments at the continued submergence of Islander realities and experience. And, when I came to address that I confronted the same dilemma that others have been trying to deal with through the assimilationist versus cultural pluralist model.

Second, and unlike the others, I was aware of another dimension to the Islander history of schooling in the Torres Straits (Nakata, 1993b, 1994b). Islanders have called for English and the State's education system for about a century now not just so they could benefit from it but also so that they could gauge and understand the external influences in their lives, what it is they are up against, and what it means for their cultural survival. This is indeed a dimension where Islanders wanted to learn from Western education how they are aligned politically and how they can appropriate a better position for themselves – to cut better deals – in the shifting economies of Western worlds and emerging global agendas.

Admittedly, there are unresolved problems with cutting new deals. This is due mainly to the

problem of becoming constrained within the projects of those liberals that afford us a status in Australia as marginal people. That is, our position in relation to the rest of the world is always first seen as 'other', and to communicate with the rest of the world Islanders need to use the language they have formed for us, and thus their perspectives. Without their language and perspectives we risk not making ourselves understood in their context. Inadequate use of them, which is often the case, can mean that we lay our views open to the logics of their world-view, and in turn lay ourselves open to misinterpretation, ridicule, and setbacks. Because of these constraints, we all tend towards the practice of articulating our standpoints in ways that non-Islanders view them, and yes we do remain quietly uneasy about them.

Increasingly, I began to see that ways have to be found for Islanders to articulate themselves whilst maintaining their political standpoint uppermost. This is a very difficult thing to do. In our attempts to get away from Western perspectives, and you may have already noticed when we as Indigenous peoples try to represent our position, we tend to use a lot of anecdotes and personal narratives. At times, and because of this, we can get very frustrated. We can get very angry with our Western colleagues for not understanding us or for being so patronising. We can also become radical and argue on separatist grounds. We can, at other times, succumb to forms of Western perspectives which is when we hear our own people identifying what we lack, or begin to blame each other for getting ourselves into predicaments. In the main, however, most of us tend to remain silent. But this is not helpful either because the liberal humanists will think that we are mostly content that their pursuit of cultural inclusion alone will make us competitive in the changing political and economic markets.

What becomes apparent from year to year is that Islanders need to regain some control of the intellectual enterprise that affects our schooling. To do this, we need to bring forward and juxtapose our knowledges and experiences of schools and the schooling process with those of the liberals. And, we need to make some radical departures from the foundations they have set for us and form new ones so that Islanders can begin to innovate schooling practices to equip students with analytical tools that they can use to read the political intersections in their lifeworlds and co-opt knowledge of them to serve their own ends.

Language Issues

One of the real dilemmas of making radical moves today, however, is how to articulate our concerns when our facility with the English language is somewhat limited, and when others ostensibly have the upperhand on the knowledge of these issues. Ironically, the very reason Islanders have so consistently pursued Western education is in fact to gain these two elements, namely the English language and knowledge of the issues, so that they can better articulate and address their concerns. When, for instance, as an undergraduate, I first argued against bi-lingual programs I did not quite understand that those who advocated them did so because they saw English-only-instruction not just as assimilationist but as obstructive to the learning process. Because of my inadequacies with the English language and limited knowledge of the issues, my questions of bilingual programs and their application in the Torres Strait context remained, and still remain, unanswered. You see, it is my view that inserting bilingual instruction models into the Torres Strait context is not a straightforward matter. Invariably proponents of such models cite other situations where it has been done. A favourite one is the

French-Canadian experience which very successfully demonstrates how quickly children pick up a second language if initially they become literate in their first language—a situation where languages of both the French and the Canadians have a long literate tradition. This situation bears little resemblance to the Torres Strait context where the first language is an oral language, and where historically there has been no print production and therefore no reading required. The second favourite citation is Aboriginal bi-lingual programs as attempted in the Northern Territory. The jury is still out on the success of the model, but nowhere in the literature is it documented that outcomes in the Territory are any more successful than outcomes for Torres Strait students under extant schooling practices. That is, I have not yet read in the literature where students who undergo bilingual programs are entering tertiary education with better skills in English than Islander students. It seems to me that advocates of bilingual programs are in too much of a hurry to transpose a model from a different context to our situation.

In our situation, a number of things has to be considered. Firstly, the linguistic diversity within the Straits precludes any one model from working. What is the first language of children entering school? It can vary from region to region where two traditional languages, the Torres Strait Creole, and their dialects are in use. As Shnukal (1984a, 1984b) and I (Nakata, 1991b) have argued, Torres Strait Islander children come from homes where there is a second language being used. For some it is the traditional language; for some it is already English; for some it is the Creole. Given such dynamics, who is to decide which is to be used as the language of instruction in schools? What are the effects on an oral language when, in order to teach children to read and write in it, we first have to produce texts for them to read? What will become of the rich oral tradition? What are the effects when the majority of these texts are negotiated texts produced in the classroom context? Can that be translated into a literate tradition of comparable richness — and what for? How and when will the transition from the first language to English occur? If it occurs toward the end of primary school how will mastery of English occur in time to proceed with high school texts? When will the foreignness of the context of Western texts be overcome? How will new concepts be introduced? Who will teach the transition years? How will secondary teachers deal with the ongoing problems of contextualising Western knowledges for Islander students? At the time, these questions were easily brushed aside as undergraduate enthusiasm and eagerness for 'straight' answers. Today, however, I am still uneasy about it all.

I am in no way suggesting that the situation should remain the same. What I am saying is that the teaching of English is paramount to success in schooling and better ways of doing it have to be found. When Islanders call for instruction in English it is because it is English they want to master. It would seem that Creole or traditional languages should be used in teaching, and many Islanders have argued that they should be used to assist children in understanding English and not as an end in itself (Nakata, Jensen and Nakata, in prep.). But to me there is just such a dearth of relevant research and better questions to be asked. For example, what is the relationship between the language of communication and the language of instruction? Are they separate and translatable or do they sit in a complementary relationship? How are the languages used in the community? How are children switching between the different codes they use? Do we need bilingual teachers who can verbalise in both languages to aid children in language learning and code-switching? Can

teachers out there in the classrooms today teach the English language? What about the practices of good teachers who improvise and experiment? Shouldn't we be tapping into the enormous resources of teacher knowledge? Why do we rely on historians, linguists, and anthropologists? Why aren't we looking at the successes of students who achieve so much despite their situation? We have not begun to scratch the surface of the language issues. I firmly believe that this has to be worked out in the Torres Strait context, with the help of people who know what they are doing but with Islanders firmly in control of the proposition: We want to learn English, so we can access Western knowledges and manage our own lifeworlds in the changing economies of the technological era.

Cultural Issues

I also raised similar concerns connected with the cultural experts and their agenda. It was a slow thing at first but it developed into what I see as a significant stumbling block to changes in Torres Strait education. Most people have misunderstood my concerns and I have been accused of all sorts of things. When we, the Indigenous peoples, start reading the cross-cultural literature we are really reading about how others see and theorise our problems. And because we are seen as 'disadvantaged' or 'under-represented' peoples, we are mostly written about in terms of what we lack. At some point in history (e.g. Haddon, 1901; Bleakley, 1961) our lacks were used to rationalise our inferiority and sub-human status and followed a historical trajectory from nineteenth century craniometry (see Gould, 1981). Currently, our lacks are seen more in terms of what the State does or does not provide in connection with access, participation and outcome levels in the various institutions of education, employment, housing, health, etc. In a lot of ways, these lacks have now become extrinsic rather than intrinsic (Ryan, 1971) and we are not held entirely responsible for our predicaments. One of the many suggestions is, for instance, that we have trouble accessing what the State provides because mainstream institutions are culturally inappropriate. Likewise, curriculum materials are seen as culturally inappropriate because Islanders are deemed to be culturally different. This may be true and I don't have a real problem with it *per se*. However, in the Torres Strait context, this form of theorising led to the foregoing research and here I begin to have a few worries. My main concern is not just with what was done, but what has not been done as well as what has been neglected along the way.

When you look at all the cultural difference literature in Torres Strait education you know researchers are trying to remedy the mismatch. You get a sense from their writings that if they study the Islander long enough they can then adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies to provide a better learning environment for the Islander. This is fine and it is sensitive and respectful and Islanders welcome it and so do I, up to a point. If attention to cultural difference results in a more culturally sensitive pedagogy that is without doubt a good thing. But, if in the end it has a negligible or limited effect on outcomes, or if difficulties with acquiring academic skills persist, then I think we have to be honest enough to admit that the strategies of the cultural difference agenda are not sufficient to deliver the standards that we are pursuing.

And, I have other concerns with it. In real terms, if educators decide through research and then institutionalise through practice a perspective that Islander children learn best in the visual and aural modes, and then adjust teaching strategies

accordingly, how is that child ever going to come to grips with, and master, English texts? How, that is, can students master English texts if these same texts are continually by-passed in the teaching process? Could it be that Islander children prefer visual and aural modes because English texts are difficult for them? Similarly, if researchers find that Islander children are collaborative learners who do not like to be individually competitive and teachers teach to those characteristics, how is the Islander child going to cope with or access the individually competitive world of higher education and the workplace? If researchers find that Islander children do not like to be spotlighted or called upon to do public performances, how are teachers going to ensure that Islander children are able to speak up and make strong cases for themselves? As an Islander, I see some real contradictions in this literature. You know, it makes me wonder why we do so well at sport. Yes, we can work in a team but we are also fiercely competitive. I know so many Islanders who like to lead, so many that love to get up and preach and who are not afraid to sermonise about the world as they see it. The shyness and shame that the liberal humanist sees is Islanders being cautious in the learning process where foreign ways and languages are being attempted and Islanders experiencing shame in the gaze of others when they do not get it right. It is not an inherent cultural characteristic.

Advocates of the cultural agenda quite rightly argue that knowledge of cultural difference should just be used to teach more sensitively and to find better ways to move children to these Western competencies but often this does not happen. In the absence of other, more appropriate academic strategies, cultural differences invariably become a way of softening the curriculum rather than strengthening it for students and this is where it begins to fail Torres Strait learners. This leads me to what I think the cultural agenda obscures. I think it is too regulatory. It calls us in, tells us what we are, what we must hold dear, how we learn and, at the end of the day, we are still in the same position - still grappling with English, still having difficulty articulating our concerns, still not in control. I think it covers over the political nature of our position. I think it has a place but it has assumed too big a place in the scheme of things and Islanders have to start asking questions of it. This perhaps is less the failure of extant research, and more due to the absence of alternative projects.

I would argue that past theorising of Islander education is simplistically constructed as either/or. This is most evident when educators believe that to reform monolingual practices we need bi-lingual ones, that to reform mono-cultural practices we need the inclusion of cultural texts to redress the situation, that there are Islander contexts on one side and Western contexts on the other, Islander knowledges versus Western knowledges, Islander languages versus the English language. There is I suppose a fear that if we pursue Western education it will be at the expense of our culture, and if we emphasise traditional culture we will miss out in the main game.

It is my view that Islanders need to re-theorise their position in relation to educational programs and practices. We, that is Islanders, do not stand in a separate domain from the Western world. We are not just Black and others White. We are part of a global picture, part of the Australian economy. We are subjected to internal as well as external influences on a day-to-day basis, and have been since the Contact periods. We interface with Western practices and ways daily in all areas of our lives, and deceive ourselves if we think that we don't. But we know so little about how we interface with Western knowledges, how we slip

in and out of different language codes, how we intersect traditional knowledges and Western technologies to assist us, how we weaken or strengthen our position when we take up Western knowledges without being critical of them or assessing their value properly, how institutional practice upholds Western knowledges, how as Black bureaucrats we become the agents of Western knowledges when we think we are representing the interests of our own people. I think we are confused at the interface because we keep expecting to name, relate, and simplify everything into either/ors.

Concluding Remarks

I think Torres Strait Islanders need to re-view Western education not just as an end in itself but as a tool for understanding our position at this interface. At the outset we need to see education as connected to our economic and social position and in every way that is political. English language and literacy cannot continue to be viewed as if there is no connection between its acquisition and our economic, social and political position. It is not a separate entity that runs apart from and different to traditional knowledges, ways, and realities. There is no easy translation between the two, rather there is a slipping in and out of them using each where appropriate and most effective. The relationship is one of complementarity rather than separateness. The English language and Western knowledges play an integral part in shaping our lives, they intersect with our own languages and knowledges. Our relationship and agency with them are all important. Far from assimilating us or destroying our uniqueness they may well be a fundamental key to our survival.

How we develop effective English language and literacy pedagogies then should be an all out serious pursuit of a model that will work for our specific situation. The practice of hastily transposing models from other contexts or unquestioningly accepting academic analyses of our situation needs to be abandoned. Any model building needs to begin with Islander experiences of schooling and move towards providing students with analytical tools so that they are able to cut better deals for themselves at the various intersections of the different lifeworlds. Future educational agendas for Islander people must begin to reflect and promote this.

Bibliography

Bleakley, J. (1961) *The Aborigines of Australia.* Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press.

Castley, S. (1988) 'Community involvement: The Saibai State School experience', *The Aboriginal Child at School,* 16(1): 35-44.

Castley, S. and Osborne, B. (1988) 'Saibai Island community expectations of their first fully qualified principal', *Queensland Researcher,* 4:6-20.

Cunnington, R. (1984) *A Case for Bilingual Education on Saibai Island.* Unpublished Graduate Diploma ESL thesis. School of Australian Linguistics, Darwin Community College.

Finch, N. (1975) *Torres Strait Island Education: Past Present and a Proposal for the Future Re-organisation of the Primary School System.* Unpublished masters thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Brisbane.

Gould, S. (1981) *The Mismeasure of Man.* London: Penguin Books.

Haddon, A. (1901) *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait.* Vol. 2. London: Cambridge University Press.

Kale, J. (1987) *Controllers or Victims: Language and Education in the Torres Strait.* Paper presented at the 57th ANZASS Congress. Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland.

Kale, J. (1988) 'Establishing positive learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the earliest years of schooling', *The Aboriginal Child at School,* 16(3): 45-51.

Langbridge, J. (1977) *From Enculturation to Evangelization: An Account of Missionary Education in the Islands of Torres Strait to 1915.* Unpublished B.A. Hons. thesis, Department of Education, James Cook University, Townsville.

Luke, A., Nakata, M., Singh, M. and Smith, R. (1993) 'Policy and the politics of representation: Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines at the margins', in B. Lingard, P. Porter, J. Knight and D. Chant (Eds), *Hard Tmes: Education Under Labor,* pp. 139-52. London: Falmer Press.

Nakata, M. (1991a) *Constituting the Torres Strait Islander: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.* Unpublished B. Ed. Hons. thesis. Department of Social and Cultural Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland.

Nakata, M. (1991b) 'Placing Torres Strait Islanders on a sociolinguistic and literate continuum: A critical commentary', *The Aboriginal Child at School.* 19(3):39-53.

Nakata, M. (1993a) 'Culture in education: for us or for them?', in N. Loos and T. Osanai (Eds), *Indigenous Minorities and Education: Australian and Japanese Perspectives of their Indigenous Peoples, the Ainu, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.* Tokyo: San-You-Sha.

Nakata, M. (1993b) 'An Islander's story of a struggle for a "better" education', *Ngoonjook.* 9:52-66.

Nakata, M. (1994a) *Report on Education and Schooling Practice in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Aeas.* Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland Printery.

Nakata, M. (in preparation/1996) 'Cultural interface', in P. Freebody, S. Muspratt, and B. Dwyer, (Eds), *Difference, Silence and Textual Practice: Readings in Critical Literacy Education.* Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Nakata, M., Jensen, J. and Nakata, V. (in preparation/1995) *Literacy Issues in Communities and Schools on Three Torres Strait islands: Report submitted to the Management Team of the Torres Strait Cluster of Schools Participating in the Queensland Education Department's Striving for Success: The School Enhancement Project.* Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland Printery.

Orr, G. (1977) *Education Language and Ideology: A Torres Strait Case Study.* Unpublished masters thesis. St. Lucia, University of Queensland.

Orr, M. (1979) *Language Instruction in Torres Strait Island Primary Schools: A Case Study in the Initiation and Promulgation of Cultural Democracy.* Unpublished PhD, The Florida State University, Florida.

Orr, K. and Williamson, A. (1973) *Education in the Torres Strait: Perspectives for Development.* Canberra: The Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

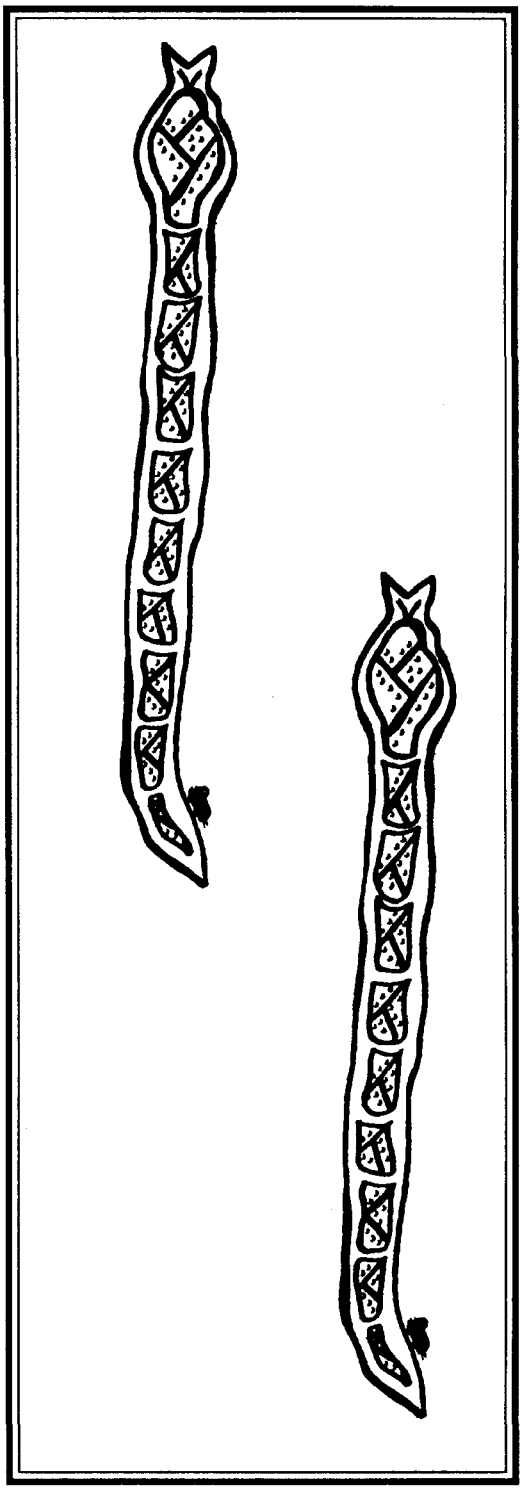
Osborne, B. (1979) *A justification of the New Strategies to Prepare Teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Pupils in Queensland.* Unpublished masters thesis.

James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville.

Ryan, W. (1971) *Blaming the Victim.* New York: Vintage Books.

Shnukal, A. (1984a June/July) 'Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland mainland schools - Part 1: Language background', *The Aboriginal Child at School,* 12(3): 27-33.

Shnukal, A. (1984b October/November) 'Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland mainland schools - Part 2: Language difficulties', *The Aboriginal Child at School,* 12(5):13-21.

Williamson, A. (1990) *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander 1873-1941.* Unpublished PhD, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Martin Nakata is a Torres Strait Islander conducting doctoral research into Torres Strait Islander discourses in education at James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville. □