



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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# INTRODUCTION: ISSUES *in* NORTH QUEENSLAND INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

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There is virtually no disagreement among educational practitioners, theorists and policy makers on the outcomes they seek for Indigenous students. Their ultimate goal is to maximise the future life choices of the upcoming generation of students in an increasingly globalised world. Balancing mainstream curriculum with Indigenous community cultural knowledge, awareness and protocol is a difficult and, finally, an individual matter to be negotiated between the school, each member of its student body and the home community. It is a task which has become increasingly urgent. Queensland - and Australia - can no longer afford the incalculable waste of intellectual and cultural capital and the dilution of participatory democracy which resulted from the pre-1980s requirement that Indigenous people be instructed only in basic literacy and numeracy. As Martin Nakata writes in this issue, "English literacy and understanding the world beyond our communities, beyond our local and cultural context, is as critically important for our future survival as understanding our traditional pathways. Anything that diverts us from the urgency of achieving educational success for future generations should be avoided." Nevertheless, while everyone agrees on the ultimate goal and its urgency, the policies and practices by which the goal is best achieved are, quite properly, a matter of contestation.

This issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education (AJIE)* contains five papers, three reports and a bibliography, each featuring some aspect of the general topic of issues in North Queensland Indigenous education (Figure 1). Never far from the surface is the recognition of the fundamental importance of cultural awareness and relevance for Indigenous students and communities. All of the papers deal in some way with the transmission of knowledge, both traditional and contemporary, as a means of empowering Indigenous students and their teachers. All of them deal with best practice in the widest sense, seeking, in the words of Louise Manas, a Torres Strait Islander teacher at Kubin State School on Mua, Torres Strait, to ensure that the students "receive a quality education with additional instruction in their own cultural tradition. Both are necessary to prepare them for life in a globalised world, while retaining their unique identity."

Given the educational interests of the guest editor, it was predictable that most, although not all, of the contributions to this issue would discuss the fundamental role played by language (in its broadest interpretation) in generating successful educational outcomes for the

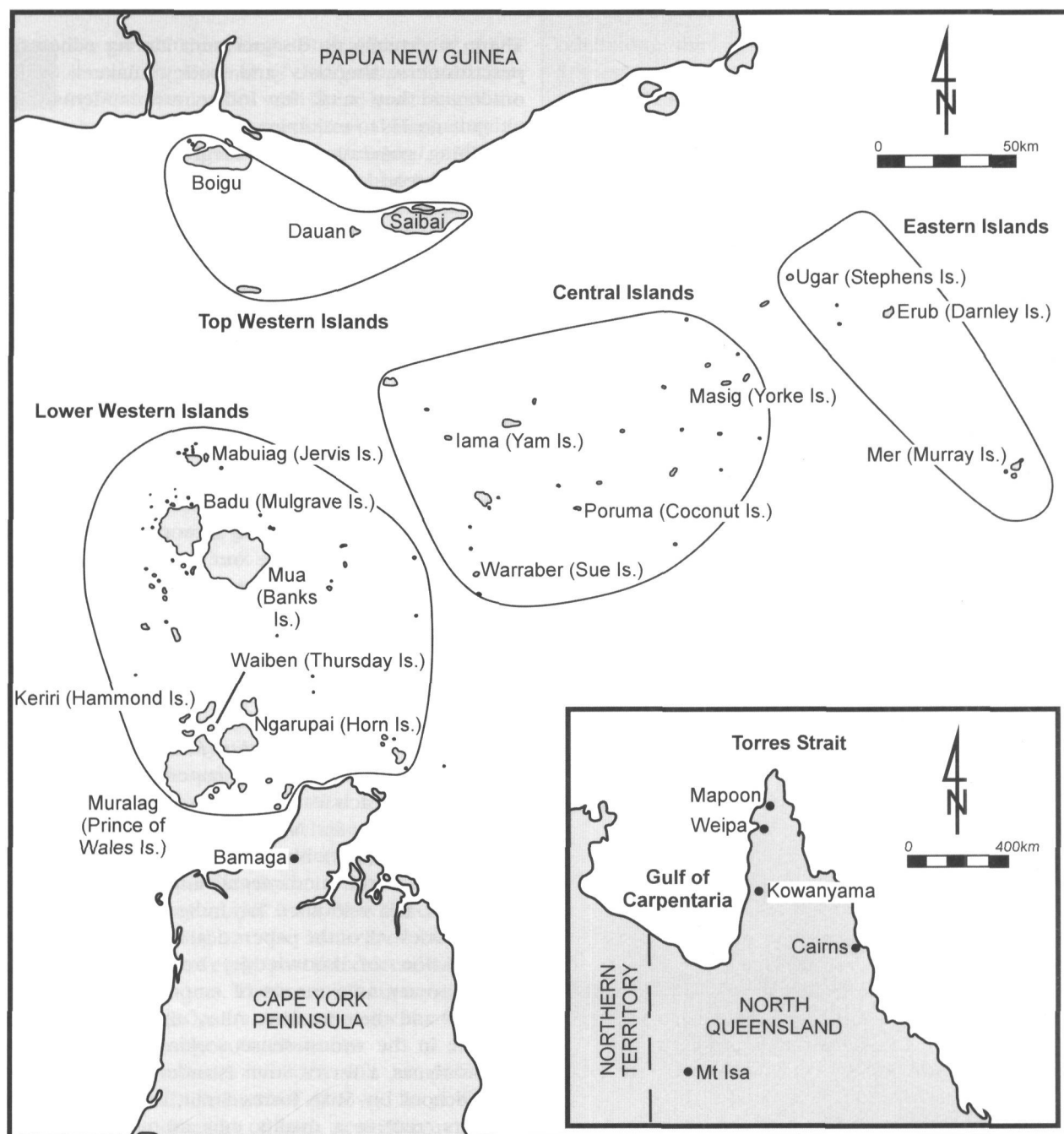


Figure 1. Map of north Queensland, showing Torres Strait and mainland locations mentioned in this issue (after Horton, D. (Ed.). (1994). *The encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Vol. 2 (p.1091). Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies).

Indigenous students of North Queensland. This is crucial in providing the widest possible choice for students facing the complex demands of twenty-first century life. Each contribution has a slightly different focus but the majority are concerned with elucidating various approaches to one of the most intractable difficulties for teaching a modern curriculum – generally developed in English for English-speakers – to speakers of Indigenous languages or dialects. They raise the question of how best to teach the acquisition of English oral and literacy skills of a sufficiently high order to permit Indigenous students the widest possible choice in making decisions about their future. This is especially the case if their future involves further formal or informal study – and what person's future today does not?

In some remote regions, such as Torres Strait, Cape York and the Gulf country, fewer than 3% of the student body speaks English as their primary language. Despite foot-dragging by policy makers in urban centres, it has always seemed to me that it is common sense (currently an under-valued attribute) to provide comprehensive and explicit teaching of the English language, preferably informed by some understanding and appreciation of the students' own languages, as the basis for mastering all other curriculum areas which are taught *through the medium of English*. This was the approach adopted by the southern states in a different, though related, context. During the 1950s state governments, faced with the consequences of large-scale post-war immigration from non-English-speaking countries, provided explicit instruction in English to the immigrants and their children – with notable success to judge by the lifeways of succeeding generations and their contribution to Australian life. The parallels with contemporary Indigenous communities are obvious, despite the many differences. However, we now face a far more complex environment, dominated by fiercely-debated social issues which impact on the classroom, such as diminished hearing, health and family discipline; political issues, such as community consultation with and co-direction of the schools, community self-management and the internal distribution of power; economic issues, such as poor employment prospects nation-wide but exacerbated in Indigenous and other communities, where welfare dependence has become entrenched; and the broadest of ideological issues, such as the place of Indigenous people in the wider Australian community and how best to translate equity and access goals into concrete and measurable achievements.

A pervasive view among many policy makers and teachers is that language teaching and learning is far removed from the vital concerns of Indigenous people in north Queensland. Another view is that language, in its widest sense, is central to the whole educational enterprise. Along with the teaching of content, cultural context and mainstream societal values through the medium of English, there is also a need for teacher sensitivity to questions of Indigenous identity

negotiation, which are raised in connection with the preferential transmission, use and control of particular languages. For it is not the case, as was formerly believed in this unofficially monolingual nation, that gaining mastery of another language means abandoning one's own or becoming less proficient in it. A more truthful and generous viewpoint, again judging by the post-war experience in Australia and elsewhere, is that, with good political management, diversity of language and worldview enriches individual lives and increases societal tolerance.

Since the turn of last century, some Queensland educators and policy makers have debated the nature of, and possible solutions to, literacy problems among speakers of Indigenous languages and on occasion put in place programs designed to produce "better" literacy outcomes. Teachers of outstanding talent have worked to implement these and other personally-designed programs, generally based on the principles of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching allied to local contextual considerations. For over 20 years I was privileged to witness a number of these in action, one of them being the Injinoo Home Language Program, described by Christine Turner in Volume 25 of *AJIE* in 1997. Often they were highly successful but their success was temporally and geographically limited and over-dependent on the drive and knowledge of particular individuals. The various programs, sometimes despite years of enthusiastic commitment, were each abandoned for a host of reasons, some as simple as the transfer from the institution of the key person or the arrival of an unsympathetic superior, others because of ideological policy changes at the highest levels of the education bureaucracy, others because adequate resources were not made available at crucial times. Yet, it would be fair to say that sound knowledge of the English language and its most widely applicable genres is the foundation for all successful education in this country and one which Indigenous community members as a whole have been advocating for over 100 years. Certainly, the best-educated and most influential generation ever of Indigenous educators, who now have the opportunity to express their views publicly and be listened to by policy makers at the highest level, almost all endorse good English language outcomes as a fundamental component of contemporary education.

Martin Nakata is the former Director of the Aboriginal Research Institute at the University of South Australia and currently Visiting Professor at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. A Torres Strait Islander, he has often reflected publicly and passionately on the ways in which his personal experiences of education and his journey towards English literacy have shaped his theoretical orientation. In the first paper of this issue Nakata unpacks the knowledges, discourses and cultural agenda which, in his view, underpin the 1989 national Indigenous education policy – its "ideological loading". He critically



examines the ways in which that policy's priorities have framed our approaches to the formal schooling issues over the past 15 years, writing not as a classroom practitioner teacher but as an Indigenous educational theorist. Nakata identifies some of the "cultural" tensions inherent in the policy to illustrate the dilemma they produce at the level of practice. He then considers the implications of these tensions for literacy teaching and ways in which they might be addressed. He concludes by discussing how shifts at the theoretical level might reframe the conceptualisation of literacy issues and priorities in Indigenous contexts.

Literacy, even in its broadest interpretation, is only one of many factors impacting on the delivery of the best possible education to Indigenous students. Barry Osborne, a long-time commentator on Indigenous educational matters in Queensland and elsewhere, with a special interest in preparing teachers of Indigenous students, examines the challenges faced by designers and deliverers of programs to teachers prior to their service in remote communities. He grapples with the question of how best to engage their "hearts, minds and actions" to enable them to deliver quality outcomes to their Indigenous students. In practice, this requires consideration by all teachers of their own subjectivities, ideological assumptions, experiential understandings of teaching and notions of childhood and adolescence, culture and social justice. Some will find that they have to unlearn what they have previously been taught and then relearn; others have to make explicit to themselves strongly held but previously unarticulated values and beliefs as well as the links between values, beliefs and actions; yet others will be helped to prepare themselves imaginatively for lives as teachers in remote settings and as effective cultural mediators. Osborne then discusses how the challenges he identifies might be addressed in the light of productive pedagogies, equitable multiculturalism, school-wide reform and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Policies without programs are merely platitudes, as the environmentalist Vincent Serventy has observed recently. Recognising that Standard Australian English (SAE) is not necessarily the primary language of many Indigenous students in Queensland, the Queensland Department of Education in 1999 committed itself to provide professional development for teachers, to ensure that all Indigenous primary students achieve a high level of proficiency in SAE. Within this policy framework the Indigenous Education and Training Alliance (IETA), in partnership with the School of Education, James Cook University, has begun to provide programs of inservice training for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers throughout the state. Glenda Shopen and Ruth Hickey assess the development and success of the first of a series of four professional development modules with university accreditation, *How English works*, which has been offered to teachers across North Queensland in a two-day workshop. Shopen and Hickey's paper focuses on

explaining those features of SAE grammar identified as relevant for the development of English literacy among Indigenous students. Through their methods and general discussion the facilitators also demonstrate that SAE is best learnt in the context of wider community discourses and texts and through regular classroom focus and practice. It is also best promoted through a communicative and collaborative classroom built on mutual trust.

Lisa Garrett, who taught on Poruma (Coconut Island), a remote island in Torres Strait, observed at first hand the difficulties faced by her students in the local State School, who had restricted access to SAE outside the classroom. In her paper she reflects on how best to mine current theory to inform the teaching of English to primary-level Indigenous students and, from her personal experience, argues for a variety of approaches from teachers sensitive to both theory and the particular social and cultural needs of students and their communities.

Garrett's paper reminds us that we must constantly keep in mind the crucial role played by the wider cultural context in the education of Indigenous students, as indeed for all students. Transmission of factual subject content, while important for developmental and assessment purposes, must, in Indigenous settings, be allied to the validation of community cultural knowledge and traditional methods of cultural transmission. Archaeologists Liam Brady and Bruno David, with the support of Louise Manas from Kubin State School and the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation, describe a cultural project, developed in partnership with and supported by the members of the Mua (Banks Island) community to instruct younger members in awareness of their cultural heritage.

The formal linguistic section of Shnukal's 1996 *Report on the Torres Strait Creole Project, Thursday Island State High School* is published here in slightly abbreviated form. The report was the product of a consultancy requested by the school to make explicit the most commonly observed differences between written Standard Australian English and spoken Torres Strait Creole, the primary language of most of the students. A report of this kind demonstrates that, almost without exception, the (mostly stigmatised) differences result not from innate lack of language ability or conceptual grasp, nor from cultural differences, but either from home language transfer into English or complex linguistic structures which test the abilities of all English learners. Making language differences explicit, showing the patterns of transfer from the language spoken by the majority of students and giving examples of their work would, it was hoped, remove the stigma attached to student "errors" in written English and raise awareness among teachers of their systematic and essentially linguistic nature. Since its appearance, the report, along with other relevant material, has provided ideological and practical support for ESL programs throughout the schools of Torres Strait and for the provision of inservice training there and on the mainland.

One of those programs was initiated in 2000 by the Thursday Island State High School, under the supervision of its Education Advisor English Language Acquisition, Susan Shepherd. This successful program arose in response to teacher and community concerns about various educational difficulties, one being the low literacy rates in Torres Strait as measured by the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) Bandscales. Shepherd and her Torres Strait Islander colleague from the ESL Project, Mette Morrison David, then began an inservice program for Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, which led to the first ESL conference held in the Strait, in May 2000 at Badu Island. In December 2001 David and Shepherd were joined by colleagues Kay Ahmat, Keith Fisher, Raba Jobi, Judy Christian Ketchell and Terry McCarthy in a well-received presentation to the State ESL Conference in Brisbane. David and Shepherd have generously allowed us to publish two items from these conferences: an overview of the general language situation at Thursday Island State High School from the Brisbane presentation by David; and highlights from the introduction to the Badu conference by Shepherd. We have published this material here to illustrate the background to concerns of teachers in remote communities and to preserve the historical record.

As a coda, we include a bibliography of published material on Torres Strait education, extracted from the *Bibliography of Torres Strait*, compiled by Anna Shnukal with assistance from Jeremy Hodes and Barry Osborne and featured on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit's website. It includes works by Torres Strait Islander and non-Islander (including Aboriginal) authors, many of them teachers, who express their views on some of the topics featured in this issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* and on many others.

