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SOME THOUGHTS *on* LITERACY ISSUES *in* INDIGENOUS CONTEXTS

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■ Abstract

This paper critically examines some elements of the nation's policy on Indigenous education priorities (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) and how they have framed our approaches to formal schooling issues over the past decade. I draw on some of the "cultural" tensions in the policy position to illustrate the dilemma they produce at the level of practice. I then reflect on the implications of these tensions for literacy teaching as well as ways that they can be addressed. The conclusion brings these reflections back to a more theoretical level to consider how shifts at the level of theory might re-frame how we might best view the literacy issues and priorities in Indigenous contexts.

■ Introduction

Although I am often called on to speak about literacy issues in the Indigenous context, the practical issues in literacy teaching are not really my domain, even though I am in the field of Indigenous education precisely to improve education outcomes and thus literacy. I have researched, written (Cazden et al., 1996; Nakata, 1995, 2000; Nakata et al., 1996), and talked (Nakata, 1997b, 1997c) about literacy issues because I have been called upon to do so, not because I actually work in the nitty gritty aspects of it. My work is, however, closely related and has significant implications for ongoing change. My contribution in this paper must therefore be qualified by the acknowledgment that I am not a practitioner – I do not work in classrooms. I leave that for those who are much better than I at teaching literacies in formal settings. It is therefore up to the reader to connect my thoughts in this paper to what teachers do in classrooms and I seek only to insert another perspective into the whole debate around literacy issues in Indigenous contexts. If, in the process, I show my ignorance of what, for instance, literacy and ESL teachers are actually doing in classrooms, I apologise.

I also have to say that I draw my views from knowledge of the Torres Strait Islander context (Nakata, 1997a), which is the context I have emerged from and one in which I am still working (Nakata, 1998). This context has many similarities to the issues in remote Aboriginal communities and schools, and as well, many of the issues are significant in regional and urban schools even though the context is sometimes quite different in those schools.

■ Policy issues

We are currently operating under the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy: Joint policy statement* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989). It is a powerful document and has been instrumental in improving the Indigenous educational situation. I do not want to engage with the national policy or its development in detail (e.g., Luke et al., 1993) but I do want to make a few points about it.

The joint policy statement is a very recent document in relation to our calls for better education. Islanders, for instance, were actively negotiating through the constrained political avenues that were available to them for improved education before the Second World War (Osborne, 1993; Williamson, 1990). They were actively

contributing to the development of schools and educational facilities right back to early missionary times (Douglas, 1900; Langbridge, 1977; Williamson, 1994). In 1904, my great grandfather built and paid for one of the first schools to be built in the Torres Strait and his only request of state authorities at the time was to supply a European teacher so that the children could be taught about the world outside of the islands (Lawrie, 1984). By the early 1980s, a survey of Indigenous education confirmed what Indigenous people had become well aware of: that the quality of education was extremely poor, that few special initiatives had ever been taken, and that "the only curriculum was a truncated primary one, low expectations of Aboriginal children being characteristic of systems and teachers" (Watts, 1982, p. 2). I mention these observations for two reasons. Firstly, because I feel it is often forgotten by those in high positions and those not so familiar with our history that Islander frustrations, which are shared by many Aboriginal people and communities, precede current policy initiatives by a long stretch. Secondly, that the initiatives to overcome our appalling situation are very recent indeed, and yet the current political climate feeds the perception that Indigenous people have received too much, for too long, and for too little in terms of outcomes.

However, the most important point about the policy that I want to make concerns the knowledges and discourses that underpin it. The agenda in Indigenous education in this country today is a cultural one. The Federal Government's push for curriculum and structural reform may be articulated in a policy brought out in 1989 but it was long before that that our situation and our educational problems were defined in terms of the cultural paradigm. This is not to say that the role of governments in producing our problems has not been acknowledged. It has. It is acknowledged that historical neglect, lack of access, lack of resources, and the general conditions of the lives of Indigenous people, which result in poverty, poor nutrition, hearing loss etc, are aspects that have to continue to be addressed. But when it comes to curriculum and learning, our problems are definitely schematised and understood in cultural terms. The organising principle of this schema is our "difference" - interpreted as cultural and linguistic difference.

This interpretation gives rise to the dilemma that is clearly enunciated in policies, which is attended to in research, and which faces everyone, with all its tensions and contradictions on a daily basis in classrooms. The tension exists between upholding and maintaining cultural difference and identity on the one hand, and producing equal outcomes to make us competitive in the mainstream on the other hand. Everyone involved in the education of Islander and Aboriginal students is grappling with this tension: from policy makers, to researchers, to remote communities, to urban communities, to teachers, to students. I think it is a measure of the success of efforts made so far that this is uppermost in everyone's minds - how to achieve these dual goals that are so powerfully

presented in policy and so important to Indigenous communities across the country. But before addressing these tensions and the dilemma that these dual goals set up I want to outline very briefly some of the background to this schema.

Agendas and policies do not come to us out of the blue. They are the end result of a long process. Particular knowledges and understandings are brought to bear on this process, and shape both their direction and form. Historical assessment informs the process - admission of historical neglect, deprivation and unequal treatment are examples of this. The use of statistics is also a powerful form of knowledge that is brought to bear on policy formation because it is able to quantify the disadvantage that historical neglect produces. However, the most important discourse that contributed to bringing about reform to Indigenous affairs was the discourse of human rights, which emerged as a powerful political force after World War II. As the United Nations emerged, European governments came under pressure to relinquish their colonies and Australia's treatment of its Indigenous people came under increasing international scrutiny. Australia could not be a signatory to human rights charters when it was severely restricting the freedom of its Indigenous people and discriminating against them in all areas of life. Human rights has therefore, in the long struggle for social justice and reform, been our main calling card.

The other major discourse that has influenced policy is anthropological knowledge - the ongoing, seemingly never-ending "science" of describing and explaining Indigenous people. Anthropology has described and explained our difference in terms of culture. Once, they explained us as primitive and from a lower culture (Nakata, 1998) but in a climate that championed human rights and equality, anthropological knowledge came to explain us as culturally different. This was important because it enabled characteristics that were previously seen as inferior, to be seen as positive, and consequently as valued. These discourses legitimated two aspects of reform. One, the stand against a separate and secondary standard of living for Indigenous people, and two, the stand against assimilation which sought to erase our visibility as a society. It thus enabled us to be recognised in the educational areas as having unique and distinctive cultures and identities - worth preserving and maintaining - not inferior, just different.

It is important to point out here that anthropological knowledge is not our knowledge even though it describes us. It is knowledge borne out of a particular Western position (Nakata, 1998). Being "culturally different" may describe us in relation to others but it adheres to a worldview of those in the West. But that is another story. The point I want to make here is that the emergence of the cultural framework, as the way to view the problems and the solutions in Indigenous education, owes much to the combined impact of human rights activities and anthropological research. In relation to the curriculum

and pedagogical aspects of reform, anthropologically based knowledge – theorised and expressed in terms of cultural and linguistic difference – has been the primary influence.

All these discourses are brought together in policy to provide a very powerful rationale for taking extraordinary measures to raise the achievement of Indigenous students. This in turn justifies the need for funding and special programs. So the cultural difference paradigm has provided a powerful rationale for reform initiatives.

■ The dilemma posed by “cultural” tensions

Here I will draw down the “cultural” tensions in policy to bring forward the dilemma that that produces at the level of practice. However powerful the rhetoric of policy, however coherent the arguments, the dual goals of policy – cultural maintenance and equal outcomes – have produced an enormous headache when it comes to implementing programs to achieve these goals. The reason for our headache is a continuing dilemma: in pursuing the dual goals of policy, we take up, in a singular framework, what are essentially oppositional positions. Neither the cultural agenda nor the pursuit of equal outcomes can be properly targeted without undermining the other. This is a dilemma to us precisely because we have been positioned from the outset to view our educational situation as it is constituted in and through our “difference”. That is, we have in our heads an organisational schema based on our “difference”, and theoretically we are trying to resolve these differences at the same time as we are trying to maintain them. This has led to a research agenda that has worked from the same premise. If there is this difference, then let’s map it all so that we understand it all, let’s develop programs that accommodate it, that don’t undermine it, let’s teach to it, etc. But what has this agenda achieved in classrooms?

Policy and reform under the cultural agenda have brought many changes into schools: new schools in communities, better access, better programs, professional development, cultural awareness, more local input, improved outcomes. But, despite this, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students continues, the students who do get into the workplace and tertiary institutions still struggle with English, and teachers still struggle to teach it effectively, despite effort and commitment.

The positive results of this agenda, in terms of curriculum and pedagogical issues, have been the acceptance of cultural sensitivity as an issue in classrooms, and the importance of cultural relevance and local contexts in the development of alternate curriculum and pedagogical practices. In more remote areas this has resulted in the recognition and inclusion of the Indigenous context in Indigenous classrooms. In schools where Indigenous students are a smaller proportion of the student population, policies of inclusion and support are evident. These achievements are quite considerable and should not be devalued.

But there have been negatives in this agenda. To me, the most damaging has been the infiltration of anthropological schemas into Indigenous educational policies and practices. More than anything I think that this has framed the issues in counterproductive ways. The Torres Strait context is an excellent example of this and is no doubt mirrored in many Aboriginal contexts. There has been such an overwhelming consensus about the suitability of the “difference” model for our educational context that it has entered popular understanding in a way that blinds us to its weaknesses and its contradictions. This transference of anthropological understanding into popular understanding has given the anthropological discourse primacy over the educational context. They have come to be viewed as one and the same.

The point I wish to make is that the anthropological model that has conceptualised our learning difficulties as the product of “cultural difference” schemas or the mismatch between two different sets of values has *over-emphasised the role of these differences in the learning process*.

I do not have any problem with the learning-styles work of people like Harris (1990). He worked from and for a particular context, with a particular goal in mind. His explanations and the models and strategies that emerged from those may well be appropriate to that context, and suitable for the goals that were being pursued. But it is the transference of those ideas into other contexts or even just into popular understanding that leads to ambiguity and confusion.

Broad understandings of differences are useful in that they call into question some of the assumptions that teachers may have about the students they teach. All the cultural (and linguistic) differences that have been brought to light through research are useful knowledge for teachers to have – precisely because they make teachers more sensitive to their students and because they reveal the complexity of the factors with which they are dealing. At the same time, they invite more responsive measures to help students move into another context. However, there are a number of dangers associated with substituting one set of assumptions with another.

First, the cultural difference schema also stands to provide a convenient explanation of student failure that exonerates teacher practice. For instance, it is commonly heard in educational circles today that “Indigenous children do not have certain mathematical concepts.” I have heard it said also that Torres Strait children cannot learn the concepts of measurement because these do not exist in their own language and culture: “teaching big and small is easy, but the refinements of that such as tall/short; thick/thin; wide/narrow; near/far and the comparatives big/bigger/biggest etc. are difficult and they just do not seem to get it.”

But the fact is Torres Strait children do have those concepts but they express them quite differently. When a five year old puffs up his shoulders and says, “he’s big this kind way”, he means tall. When a child says “I go ... I go, go ... I go, go, go”, he means, “I went a very long way”.

The difficulty lies not in the concept but the language that expresses it. This is the difficulty of teaching mathematics to any child. The issue is how to teach them a standardised language through which to express certain relations that are evident in their world and the world beyond them. The problem in teaching these concepts is more a literacy issue and yet we hear these generalisations expressed more often as essential cultural differences. Knowing these things about Torres Strait children is not merely understanding some essential cultural difference but it is about having quite a specialised understanding about how children give expression to the world that they see themselves in.

Awareness of these things has implications generally for the teaching process. For one, sorting concrete objects won't solve the problem – rather, verbalisation is the key. Yet many teachers are content to teach such concepts concretely and test them that way because they have a preconceived notion that that is how these children learn. Students move on and fail problem solving at a higher level because they cannot untangle the mathematical language of the problem. And we all sit around thinking they fail because of a mismatch between two sets of cultural understandings and values – that no amount of teaching and effort seems to overcome.

There are countless examples such as this where attributing particular difficulties to problems of cultural difference inhibits the response of teachers to the effects of these differences in classrooms. Let me provide you with a few more examples.

- It is one thing to say that the lowering of eyes and not making eye contact is a cultural behaviour and should be accepted in classrooms. Any sensitive teacher would not admonish a child for such a thing, if they understand it as a cultural behaviour. So awareness of difference is helpful, perhaps essential. But it is another matter to neglect to teach that child that in other contexts it is important and appropriate that they do make eye contact. The task for the teacher, then, is to provide the conditions for children to learn appropriate behaviours for different contexts. If we do not, we will diminish the child's chances for success and opportunities in the modern world.
- It is one thing to accept that children are different from others and prefer to learn collaboratively in groups, or not be spotlighted. But it is another matter to neglect to build the skills and confidence needed to stand in the spotlight and to work independently when we know very well that children need to develop all these skills to be successful later on.
- And so with language: it is one thing to say children prefer visual and aural modes of learning but it is another matter to use this as a rationale for neglecting the written word when we know this is exactly what they need.

The description of cultural differences is useful and knowledge of them increases teacher sensitivity and

understanding of students. But we *fail* our students if we do not ensure that they develop the necessary skills for success in non-Indigenous contexts. *And we insult the intelligence of our children if we think that they cannot learn to distinguish what behaviours are appropriate to what contexts, and cannot learn to switch between them.* This does not equate to permission to berate and diminish children who behave inappropriately in the classroom and learning context. It is to argue the opposite – that classroom and learning environments need to provide the conditions in which students can learn the skills that are necessary to operate in different contexts.

Nowhere has the anthropological model been more damaging than in relation to the language issue, particularly the Islander context. That the anxiety we have about losing traditional languages can be used to undermine the need to equip our children and our workers with English is a great pity. These are issues that have to be addressed but the promotion of one language against attaining expertise in another is simply to misunderstand the context of the debate. I think it very important for Islanders to keep their eye on the main game when it comes to educating our children and I know that all around the country and across very diverse Aboriginal contexts, many Aboriginal people feel the same way. Our communities are literally “a drop in the ocean”. We do not have many avenues for leverage with governments. 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.

These are illustrations of the tensions that are produced by the double binds in the current policy position and that have been translated into a popular understanding that constrains educational responses in achieving policy goals. Teachers grapple with these tensions on a daily basis. On the one hand, they are aware that the effects of cultural differences do produce real difficulties for their Indigenous students. As well, they know that many of the strategies that work for other children do not work successfully for their Indigenous students or at best extend the timeframe that it takes to learn necessary skills. On the other hand, many teachers are extremely practical and know the urgency and necessity of their Indigenous students to be doing and performing exactly what other students do in their classrooms if they are ever to master literacy practices. Many feel constrained and guilty if they focus on English literacies and neglect cultural factors. Many worry about their role in taking children further away from their cultural context. Not surprisingly, many effective literacy teachers begin to lose confidence in relation to their understanding of the situation. They lose themselves in the confusing array of advice, suggestions, their desire to do the right thing, an inability to please everyone, conflicting perspectives, particular individual situations

where their efforts are not well received or are not given support. In essence, they lose themselves to the uncertainty, the constant changes and the knowledge that their Indigenous students are the losers. Their problems with Indigenous students are in addition to all their other problems in the classroom.

■ Implications for literacy teaching

So what approach can teachers take to deal with all of this complexity, this uncertainty, this tension? For teachers and stakeholders in the Torres Strait I will now suggest how we might address the complexities in literacy education from the perspective of effective teaching practices. I use the Torres Strait context but I think readers can connect that to their own situations.

It is the urgency of the issue that has led me to consider the best practice of teachers. It is also because, however much the framework for viewing our problems is shifted from the anthropological schema to something better, these shifts take time to filter into popular understanding and in that process there is a lot of scope for distortion and misinterpretation. This work has to be done but the urgency of the problem suggests other strategies should be implemented at the same time.

Over the years since I started thinking about literacy issues, I think that I, along with many others, was visualising as an end product some perfect language program that would meet the needs of Torres Strait children (e.g., Nakata, 1997b). And over the years too, I have suggested that concerted efforts need to be made to develop a model from the ground up, rooted in the Torres Strait context, rather than relying on bringing in outside models and making adaptations (e.g., Cazden et al., 1996; Nakata, 1995). Indeed, when you look at the models used in literacy teaching in the Torres Strait, and this is true in other Indigenous contexts, they parallel the developments in literacy teaching in the mainstream. Further, I have often thought: "well no wonder we lag behind, we are not developing models appropriate for our context, we are always just adding on or trying to fit ourselves into somebody else's model".

In the Torres Strait we went from highly structured phonic approaches of the kind I was instructed under, to the whole language approach and specialised programs for the local context, to English as a Second Language (ESL) approaches, and now to First Steps (Dewsbury, 1996) and FELIKS (Berry & Hudson, 1997), the Reading Recovery Program, etc. This progression parallels developments in the mainstream. First Steps is very popular on the mainland at the present time and in Aboriginal contexts as well. All these programs bring to us the strengths they hold for mainstream and other students but always we are trailing in terms of successful outcomes. Whatever the approach, the gap between us remains. The specialised English language program that was developed specifically for the

Torres Strait context has not achieved the expectations of some for a number of reasons (see Cazden et al., 1996). Even I for a long time held a view that we just needed a better one.

I still adhere to the view that we need to build from the ground up but *I am moving right away from the idea of a definitive program*. And that is simply because more and more, I have come to believe that it is effective teachers who make the difference rather than the program in use. That is, good teachers can produce good results using, or even despite, any program if they fully understand the goals and processes of literacy learning and the children they teach. This is because they adapt and innovate all the time adjusting things to the individual differences of their students and the context as circumstances require. By doing this, effective teachers have an extensive repertoire of skills that is not confined to any one method but is built on experience and knowing what works and what does not. Effective teachers are always thinking about and reviewing what they are doing and evaluating how well strategies are working even when they have long years of experience.

In a recent review of literacy issues in the Aboriginal context, Batten et al. (1998) conducted a number of case studies in schools that were considered to be responding successfully to their Aboriginal and Islander students. What they discovered was that these teachers were effective literacy teachers *for all students*. Although the case studies were mostly regional and urban schools - I think the most remote was Broome - effective teachers operated with sensitivity to cultural difference but with less knowledge of the content of that difference than one might expect. What they did was *teach literacy* and their view of the difficulties and the issues revolved around how to do it, how to move children along.

Many of the "how to" questions these teachers grappled with are the very same questions we ask in the Torres Strait context, and indeed are the very same questions that teachers everywhere ask in relation to children from a wide range of cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. The following, framed as statements, are typical:

- It is difficult to get this child to write because they do not have a variety of experiences to draw on, and so they write the same thing over and over.
- I know I have to move this child on from recounts but I don't know how. Or, I have tried everything that works with other children but it doesn't seem to work in this situation.
- I know it is important that these children learn to speak confidently but I can't make the breakthrough.
- I constantly model Standard Australian English for my children, and I don't denigrate their language, but how can I encourage them to use English in the classroom?

And as well, teachers have a lot of answers.

- I find if I do this first, then I can move them on.
- When I know that they are not reading at home, I make extra time to hear them every day so they do get their practice.

I could go on with examples but the point I am trying to make is the same I have made before, that teachers themselves have a wealth of knowledge and experience in literacy teaching – they innovate, they adapt, and they are often very creative. But the isolation of the classroom and the sheer workload limits and inhibits the opportunities for circulating, sharing, and accessing this experiential knowledge. Not only does this knowledge not circulate very effectively but also it is not recorded or documented in any systematic way. This is particularly so in remote areas where teachers are transitory and take their hard-earned knowledge with them when they leave. Experienced and effective teachers have an enormous repertoire of skills and extensive understanding of processes. But this does not always translate more broadly into the system. Instead, teachers often feel that they are under pressure to change and abandon programs and strategies that they have worked up and adapted at the cost of enormous personal energy and commitment.

The forms of literacies that are required to understand the world are constantly changing, and this does inform many of the changes that have to occur as schools respond to these changes. Information is now electronic. Societies are increasingly diverse and complex. Indigenous students and their teachers have to keep up with these. Bringing in outside models as we have always done makes sense. These are influenced and shaped by a variety of developments in the ways that educators understand the forms and processes of literacy development in children. If we want equal outcomes we have to be in sync with all these things. But it is in the fine-tuning of these, to work effectively in our context, where the hard work needs to be done. And I do believe that effective teachers, the committed, the experienced, and the innovative ones, have to be given time, have to be drawn on to contribute to this process. It is the work of effective teachers that has increasingly interested me. Effective teachers are, not surprisingly to me, the most sensitive teachers. They are in my eyes also the most vulnerable: many have their views overlooked in the politics of schools, many move on to study, or to other sectors. These teachers need more support and validation for what they do.

■ Responding to these complexities in the classroom

I have suggested to teachers in the Torres Strait, and I think it could easily apply to other contexts, that a good place to start is surveying on an ongoing basis, not a one-off basis, the questions that teachers cannot answer on their own, the doubts that they have about what will work

and what won't work. For instance, teachers in the Torres Strait and elsewhere are now moving away from the immersion model of language and hailing the need for more explicit teaching of phonics, structures, and grammars. But what are the pitfalls? Older teachers will remember that structured phonics and grammars have been done in times past, and their weakness was that reading for meaning was neglected and rote learning was largely a meaningless activity. Does moving away from immersion models mean that we no longer have to worry about putting up all that print everywhere, no longer have to worry about reading, reading, reading to children. Does it mean that flooding the learning environment with books is a waste of time? No it does not. But how many teachers will slowly neglect the valuable aspects of the immersion model? How many teachers who do not jettison the best practice of immersion models will be criticised for holding onto what they know works? Remember those teachers who tried not to neglect the importance of decoding skills in whole language models? How criticised they were for explicit teaching within the immersion model? How frustrated are they now that this is exactly what is now being argued?

Teachers need these issues clarified continually, in response to ongoing changes and innovations. Everything we do should be refining our understanding of processes and strategies for literacy teaching and learning. To go back to the example I just mentioned, children need to be immersed in print and exposed to it but the lesson that has been learnt from whole language learning everywhere is that immersion is not enough. Explicit teaching has to be brought in to enhance learning in a way that keeps children engaged with literacy in a meaningful way. These are the nitty-gritty issues that mess up the best intentions of teachers. What is the difference between meaningless rote-learning and effective repetition and practice that will lead to mastery of skills? What does that look like in classroom practice? Old teachers may know, but what of younger teachers who have not been through the full circle of all these shifts? There are hundreds of such questions that worry teachers and yet other teachers may know some of the answers. The answers to many of these questions can be drawn together from a wide range of places and teachers and contexts. But for many questions, the answers will be unique to the particular context, whether it be a metropolitan classroom or an extremely remote one. Teachers need to proceed systematically and confidently to trial, track, and share their strategies. For remote places like the Torres Strait this would be valuable. I am sure a difficult inner-city school with its transient populations of both students and wearied teachers could likewise benefit from the documentation of such experiences and learned outcomes.

■ Linking language and literacy

What about the language issue? It is a complex situation: the issues revolve around first language maintenance,

around the oral/literate duality, around conceptual learning, around the absence of "Standard Australian English" outside the school environment. ESL strategies are popularly employed and will have a lot to contribute but planning, programs, and strategies have to be appropriate in meeting Indigenous goals. In the Torres Strait, I caution against allowing ESL experts to direct what happens there. ESL personnel, like all specialists, should be used as a resource to facilitate Indigenous goals. And it is up to Indigenous peoples to plan where we want our children to be and for ESL advisors and teachers to bring their expertise to facilitate that. Teachers of Indigenous students generally have to keep resisting the simplification and reduction of literacy goals to functional literacies. It is the complexity of the English language that causes difficulty and it is that complexity that Indigenous students have to master.

Not every Indigenous child is going to go on to tertiary education but nor does every non-Indigenous child. We must have the full menu on offer. There may have to be a diversity of options toward the end of secondary school, but we want no second-class menu presented to our children in our schools. I have been distressed over the years about research reports on ESL strategies (e.g., Osborne & Dawes, 1992). Secondary school children are being skilled in over-the-counter transactions as if they are being skilled for a future of dealing with welfare agencies. To me that is just an acceptance of defeat. It is schooling for failure. It might be considered as some specialised genre that fits in somewhere but please keep it in its rightful perspective. It is merely palliative care for a terminal disease.

Literacy teaching is constantly being developed and refined in other places and that is what we have to do too in the Indigenous context. But we have an extra burden because we have to deal with the language issue and the issues of isolation, relevance, and alienation. There will never be a definitive solution. We will always be in process. Teachers' understandings of the forms and processes in teaching literacies need constant development so they can act confidently in assessing the effectiveness of programs and strategies to meet the needs of their students in appropriate ways. Teachers and the systems could benefit a lot from getting better organised to handle this ongoing process. We need to keep calling on specialists but shift their role from experts who direct Indigenous priorities, to specialists who facilitate Indigenous goals. We need to keep searching for more effective specialists. For instance, in relation to language issues in the Torres Strait, there are linguists and there are linguists. I would steer away from linguists who have their heads in the "preserve at all costs" clouds, and move towards linguists who understand the socio-political aspects of language, discourse, texts and knowledges. Traditional linguists who document traditional languages have their place, but keep them at the margins of educational agendas. Indigenous education probably needs a range of

specialists: specialists that deal with broad aspects of literacy, specialists who deal at the micro-level say in grammar, metalanguage, code-switching, etc. But Indigenous advisors and teachers in classrooms *need to keep tying everything together, to bring coherence to the project, to keep the focus.*

Recently, I listed the following strategies for Torres Strait Islander teachers that may apply to others:

- Start documenting best practice and circulating it more systematically.
- Start building a repertoire of strategies, answers to teachers' questions, strategies that people have tried and that work for them, as well as explanations of why things do and do not work.
- Retain the best practice from all models of teaching because I think a lot of effective strategies are thrown out when programs are abandoned. Likewise a lot of strategies that are known not to work are re-tried simply because teachers are unaware they have been tried before.
- Deal with the nitty-gritty issues and build up. The advantage of Islanders doing this is that Islanders build up documented evidence of what has been done, what has worked, what has not worked, what should be retained, what lessons should not be forgotten. This gives Islanders a more substantive position from which to assert themselves in the face of ongoing direction from people not fully familiar with our specific difficulties and our historical context. It gives us more control in manipulating mainstream programs and specialist knowledge to serve our context.

I do not want to imply that this should all be left to teachers. Teachers already do more than they have time for. It is crucial for attention to focus on how to organise such an ongoing process. If anything, there is a substantial case for more research being done on the ground in Torres Strait classrooms and probably classrooms everywhere. In particular, such research must focus on teaching practices that will shed more light on the language situation of Indigenous students. There is also a need for a formal centre for cataloguing and retaining such data so that we can progressively move towards achieving better outcomes.

■ Shifts in theory and our view of literacy

Both policy, and as a consequence, practice and research, have been theoretically framed in a rather simplistic way. Our position, our problems, and the way they are discussed keep being brought back to simple dualities: traditional versus mainstream; traditional language versus English language, etc. Whilst there is nothing problematic about pursuing the dual goals of cultural maintenance and equal outcomes, we do need to find a more effective theoretical framework within which primacy can be afforded to Indigenous standpoints.

The reality is that the Indigenous context in relation to the mainstream is very complex. The two domains are not entirely separate and the boundaries are not well defined. Today Indigenous people operate at the interface of two different cultures that have different histories and different worldviews. Neither traditional cultures nor the "mainstream" are static entities, and theoretically speaking we do not operate entirely in one or the other at any given time. We are constantly engaging with changing ideas and knowledges from outside our communities as we shape and reshape our worlds. Any theoretical framework that is deployed to assist us in understanding and improving our position has to address the reality of this complex interaction. To consider the literacy situation of, for example, Islander children as a simple movement between traditional and English language and to consider those languages as simply encapsulating two opposing cultures is to ignore the dynamics of reality. It is also to ignore the reality of what people do as they go about their lives. The complexities of teaching literacies are evident in classrooms everywhere, and the particularities of diverse Indigenous contexts inject additional complexities into the task of teaching. Teachers in the system, and Indigenous people outside of it, have to learn the language of such complexities.

What is central to many Indigenous lives is our relation to the "mainstream". It impacts on us daily in many ways. It is that relation we have to understand. It is that relation we have to change if we are to improve our position. That relation shapes our position at the interface. The education that we provide for our students must attend to these complexities if they are ever going to understand what produces the position that they find themselves in.

This is why research at the theoretical and knowledge level is important. The work I am currently doing is an attempt to establish an Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 1998). This means, as simply as I can put it, that we - as Indigenous peoples - need a particular reading position from which to assess knowledges that inform how our position is understood and how our relation with the outside world is engendered. A future goal is to use this standpoint to build better courses in Indigenous studies, but it will have further implications, especially with the literacy issues.

The reason it is necessary to develop such a standpoint is this. We need an alternative to the anthropological standpoint on "difference". I have criticised this standpoint because to a large extent the discourse of difference is just an updated version of the discourse of inferiority, and it perpetuates our marginalisation. But I have criticised it as well because it does not adequately represent how we have experienced our position at the interface of converging historical trajectories. Yet we cannot submerge the anthropological standpoint of difference without providing a standpoint that will uphold us as a group as having a unique and distinct culture, as having our own history, our own traditional

knowledges, our own identity. I argue that in establishing an Indigenous standpoint we uphold, indeed strengthen identity through understanding our position in relation to the outside world. We gain and retain a sense of ourselves through understanding our traditional relationships and our own history, as well as through understanding our relationship with the outside world.

Instead of being preoccupied with our "differences", we can shift to understanding how the knowledges of the outside world work to position us in particular ways and in a particular relation (Nakata, 1997a). In our recent history, this has been an extremely demeaning relationship and we have already achieved much to reestablish a more equal relation with non-Indigenous peoples. And if we understand these things then all our actions and interactions at the interface of two different cultural sets of understandings - which is where we operate on a daily basis - can work to assert our position, to assert our independence from others, to identify ourselves in relation to others. In this way, we become more powerful players in shaping and influencing knowledges that seek to position us and to explain to others what we are and where we need to be going.

If we do not develop our own theoretical standpoint we will always be in the position of relying on others to assess what is best for us instead of doing it for ourselves. Without our own standpoint, those of us that do master English literacies will continue to unwittingly undermine our position by viewing our difficulties from a perspective that is not our own. Simply retaining cultural knowledge as an adjunct to learning English literacies will not overcome this. This is why the type of research that I do, which seems so far removed from classroom practice, is important to the ongoing process of understanding what we have to do to improve our position and why the dialogue has to keep going in a constructive way. Someone with a different perspective has to step back and keep looking back in, if a clearer picture is to emerge.

■ Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have shared with readers some of my thoughts on literacy issues in Indigenous contexts. I have discussed some of the issues surrounding the national Indigenous education policy priorities and how they generally come to constrain approaches to Indigenous education. This context was then used to draw down the "cultural" tensions embedded in the national policy priorities in order to highlight the dilemma that that causes at the level of practice. As a way of illustrating this dilemma, I presented some of the implications of these tensions for literacy teaching as well as some thoughts on how they can be approached. I sought then in the final section to bring the issues back to a more theoretical level to discuss how shifts at the level of theory might re-frame how we view the literacy issues and priorities in the Indigenous context. I have not mentioned much about

other aspects of the literacy development of Indigenous students that might add to the reader's understanding. But I can say that I uphold any moves toward developing more knowledge and language about language – what it is, its purpose, how it is structured and organised, the importance of context for understanding meaning, the socio-political contexts – anything that assists Indigenous students to use language to understand and give expression to their position, their view of the world.

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