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REPORT *on the* DEMOGRAPHICS *and* LANGUAGE GROUPS *of* THURSDAY ISLAND STATE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS *at the* STATE ESL (ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE) CONFERENCE, BRISBANE, DECEMBER 2001

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■ Abstract

This report was originally delivered to the State English as a Second Language Conference held in Brisbane in December 2001. It was part of a team presentation made to a plenary session by representatives from Torres Strait (Terry McCarthy, Mette Morrison David, Judy Christian Ketchell, Raba Jobi, Keith Fisher, Kay Ahmat and Susan Shepherd). Its aim was to inform Queensland English as a Second Language teachers about the language situation at Thursday Island State High School shortly after the appointment of an Education Advisor English Language Acquisition. The report deals with the linguistic background of the students, the teaching of languages other than English and the urgent need for appropriate professional development in English as a Second Language or English as a Foreign Language insights and methodologies.

■ Languages spoken by our students at Thursday Island State High School

Thursday Island State High School is situated on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait islands. There are 15 feeder schools.

Three of the feeder schools are Saibai, Dauan and Boigu in the Top Western Island Group. These islands are accessible by small plane or by dinghy. You can see Papua New Guinea from these islands' northern shores. The students at these schools speak a traditional language to communicate with the people who live on these islands. The language is called Kalaw Kawaw Ya. It is linguistically similar to mainland Aboriginal languages. The second language that is spoken is Torres Strait Creole (TSC). This is a language that has been developed over five generations from the mixture of "tongues" that had to communicate with the Islanders over the past century. TSC is a recognised language with its own linguistic and grammatical structure. The third language that is spoken by many of the Top Western Islanders is Kiwai, a Papuan language. The fourth language and the least used language is Standard Australian English (SAE).

The Central Island students from Warraber, Coconut, Yam and Yorke speak TSC and their second language is SAE. Many of the Eastern Islanders from Murray, Darnley and Stephen speak Meriam Mir, TSC and SAE. Many of the students from Mua, Badu and Mabuiag Island speak Kala Lagaw Ya, TSC and SAE. Students at the local primary school speak a "lighter" TSC and many speak either Kala Lagaw Ya, Kalaw Kawaw Ya, Meriam Mir, Kiwai and Papua New Guinea Pidgin (Tok Pisin). 60% of the students are bilingual, 30% are trilingual and 7% speak four languages. 3% speak English as their first language. We live in a "linguistic paradise" and we are teaching linguistically talented students. However, the SAE literacy and numeracy results are below the State norm.

■ The teaching of languages other than English

Historically Australia regarded languages other than English as a problem. We introduced compulsory

instruction in Languages Other Than English (LOTE) so that we might develop an understanding of other cultures and to learn languages other than English. It was seen to be quite an embarrassment that our students had no exposure to other languages, that our schools were predominantly monolingual in the days of reconciliation and multiculturalism.

Our students in the Torres Strait are multilingual, they are an example of, and a showcase of linguistic excellence but their academic achievements in the school system do not match this excellence. Surely, somewhere the system must be failing our Indigenous students.

Most of these students arrive at Thursday Island State High School with the fundamentals in reading, writing, spelling and maths in SAE which is a credit to them and their teachers at their respective schools. The class sizes are the same size as schools on the mainland and it is a continuous struggle for these hardworking and dedicated teachers to meet the expected student outcomes.

Professional development in English as a Second Language or English as a Foreign Language

Appropriate professional development in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is not offered to the teachers. Indeed, some teachers arrive to teach in the region with no knowledge of the languages spoken. The students are generally not achieving levels of English competence required to cope with the Grade 8 maths and Grade 8 English curriculum. It is an unrealistic and an almost unachievable goal as the odds are stacked against these students - it is an unfair and an inequitable situation.

About the author

Mette Morrison David was born and brought up in Cairns, where she attended primary and secondary school. Quite accidentally, since further study was generally not considered an option for most Torres Strait Islanders, she applied for and was accepted by Townsville Teachers' College. She graduated in 1990 with a Diploma of Teaching in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and began teaching at the Thursday Island Pre-School. Because of family difficulties, she resigned from her position and joined the Queensland Department of Family Services as a Community Resource Officer in 1991. There she established and had primary responsibility for resourcing and supporting all the new child care programs in the Cape, Gulf and Torres Strait islands. Towards the end of 1997 Mette joined the teaching staff of Thursday Island State High School, where she has been ever since. It was at the High School that she first became aware of ESL as a methodology - although many teachers had identified the students' literacy problems, they did not realise that possible solutions might be found in the use of ESL techniques until the arrival of Susan Shepherd. Mette was trained by Sue and now inservices other teachers, especially Indigenous teachers, throughout Torres Strait and Cape York.