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“WE’RE *the* MOB YOU SHOULD *be* LISTENING *to*”: ABORIGINAL ELDERS *at* MORNINGTON ISLAND SPEAK UP *about* PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS *with* VISITING TEACHERS

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■ Abstract

This paper explores, with a qualitative framework, critical social theory and thematic analysis, the narratives of many Aboriginal elders of Mornington Island (Kunhanhaa) about their history and their potential to form productive kin-based relationships with visiting teachers in order to influence the curriculum and pedagogy delivered at the local school. One exemplary teacher’s journey provides educational insights that teachers need to be culturally responsive, friendly and compassionate and should heed the advice of senior Indigenous members of a community to be successful teachers. No other teachers are interviewed, nor are the opinions of the Queensland Department of Education sought. I spent from 1998 to mid 2003 researching this topic for my PhD after many of the elders asked for my help to improve the educational outcomes of the local school and the lives of the children in the community. Thirty of the male elders and 12 female elders asked me to help them regain their former positions as teachers at the local school, as they had severe misgivings about prevailing relationship with the teachers and the contribution of the school to their community. This participatory action-research paper positions the elders as active agents, insistent that teachers act as edu-carers to ensure the community’s young people’s survival in the face of worsening anomie.

■ Introduction

I would like to acknowledge the ancestors and traditional owners of the country, the skies, waterways and spiritual systems of the country in which I write, *Munanjali-Yugembah* country, also known as the Jimboomba area. I acknowledge the traditional owners and ancestors of *Kunbanbaa* (Mornington Island) for allowing me to write this article and share their knowledges. I also acknowledge my own ancestors of the *Muringong-Darug* (South Western Sydney) nation and the ancestors of those who read this article.

This paper, which analyses many of the Mornington Island Aboriginal elder’s accounts of their need to have better relationships with the teachers of their school, offers insights into improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children in a remote community, especially given that the manuscript relates to a remote Aboriginal community where school attendance in 2009 averaged 65 percent, compared with a Queensland state average of 90.6 percent. I acknowledge that Western knowledge is yet to accept fully to the vast storehouse of Indigenous knowledge, although universities are now embedding Indigenous perspectives into most degrees in Australia. Matthews (2003) and Matthews et al. (2005) argue that within Australia, education does not include the views of Indigenous people in its pedagogical approaches. Because of these Indigenous views and in view of the fact that Aboriginal community schools in Western Australia, which are supervised by the elders of the community, are successful, this paper focuses on the recognition that Aboriginal elders have traditionally been the educators of their family and their clan’s children in a culture that existed for thousands of years (Cajete, 2000; Suzuki & Knudson, 1992; Walker, 1993; Sheehan & Walker, 2001). The *Ngaanyatjarra*, *Pitjantjatjarra* and *Yankunytjatjara* Women’s Council (1991), Sheehan and Walker (2001) and Stepetin et al. (2002) all argue that elders always are the instigators of Indigenous knowledge (IK) and according to Smith (1999) elders should “decolonise

research methodologies" by initiating all Indigenous knowledge research education projects in their community. Elders are also the primary teachers, facilitators, guides, role models and care providers for all people in their community. However, the Purga (*Yugumbir*) elders who worked with The University of Queensland researchers commented that much "academic research and language excludes elders from sharing in the design, implementation and benefits of education" (Sheehan & Walker, 2001, p. 16). Sheehan and Walker (2001) have argued that researchers must also demystify university research, in open and culturally appropriate ways by speaking language that is not jargonistic and is easily understood by Indigenous people worldwide. Consequently in both my PhD thesis (Bond, 2004) and this article I have used language that is easily understood and that is "yarning and narrative".

This article also acknowledges that recent literature recognises that an important factor contributing to the failure of government schooling and welfare in remote Aboriginal communities is the fact many teachers and welfare workers do not listen to and respect the knowledge of the elders of a community (NSW Department of Communities, 2009; Gray & Partington, 2007; Blitner, 2000; Battiste, 2002; Pearson, 2003; Sarra, 2003). The prospect of restoring control over community development and capacity building to Indigenous people themselves (Dobson et al., 1997; Martin, 2002; Foley, 2000) also gives what Battiste (2002) refers to as "[the] rich treasure of neglected knowledge and teachings of the elders" a chance to resurface and play a vital role in restoring the unity and dignity of communities (Blitner, 2000; Australian Quality Teacher Programme, 2010).

The research was a longitudinal study in which Mornington Island elders' conversations are explored, in this document, in numerous recursive participatory action-research interviews regarding productive relationships between themselves and visiting teachers, which they believe will benefit the students and their Aboriginal community. The research is also based on critical social theory in that it "emphasises people's agency and the capacity to achieve social change" (Payne, 2005, p. 242).

At the time of my PhD thesis, the senior women or female elders of Mornington Island called themselves "grannies" rather than "grandmothers" or aunts. It is the way they identified themselves and they were respectfully known in the community by this name. The grannies and male elders recommend that teachers personally connect on social and personal levels with the community and they recommend cultural competency classes for the school teachers when they arrive. They suggest that the state educational department, as an institution, employ both elders and grannies as cultural consultants and voluntary advisors and allow them to sit on interview panels for new

teachers. The senior members of Mornington Island community also argue that they should advise the visiting teachers on culturally appropriate pedagogy and curriculum. This paper also examines roles of the previous exemplary teachers, who were adopted into large, local families and who became popular members of the community, as well as exploring the successful programs that the elders, grannies and one exemplary teacher initiated at the school.

■ Background

This paper discusses the interviews with many Mornington Island (*Kunbanbaa*) male elders and grannies, who speak of their wish to regain political and disciplinary control of their community, in particular their control of the inclusive pedagogy and curriculum at Mornington Island School. The elders perceive that by having productive and instructive relationships with the incoming teachers the Indigenous students will gain an education that includes Western up-to-date knowledge and knowledge of their Indigenous culture. The elders also hope that productive relationships with government teachers will also lead to the Indigenous students being mentally and physically healthy and leading community beneficial lives.

Memmott et al. (2001), writing the Queensland Report to Crime Prevention Branch of the Attorney-General's Department, argued that Aboriginal social structures were broken down by the political and disciplinary disempowerment of elders by mission and reserve managers, who eroded the spiritual and secular power and control of Aboriginal elders and community leaders. Though these missionaries and managers were well meaning (Freier, 2006) the male *Kunbanbaa* elders still fulminate about the loss of their authority in their community and in this respect, Memmott (1990, p. 23) argues that the practice of undermining the authority of such elders was an outcome of the work of mission managers whose duty it was to effect social changes in Indigenous communities. This erosion of power has included a denial of the humanness of Indigenous people, their culture and governance systems and has excluded them from the benefits of modern Australian society (Havemann, 2005; Willey, 1979). All of this according to Havemann (2005) and Willey (1979) was justified by the imaginary legality that Australia was *terra nullis* (or land that belonged to no one) which justified the occupancy of the Australian continent, by the British, in 1788 and thereafter. The violence of this exclusion has been masked by ideologically managed official and institutional denial. The conversations of senior *Kunbanbaa* members from 1998-2003, reveal that this denial, exclusion and dehumanisation were still continuing and frustrating most of the male elders and grannies at Mornington Island Aboriginal community.

Although it seems contradictory throughout this paper, the elders and grannies alternately praise and blame the missionaries and managers and in this regard, Memmott et al.'s (2001) research has established that the disempowerment of these senior figures and their ancestors was achieved through mechanisms such as banning ceremonies, banning traditional marriages and polygamy, banning their Indigenous languages as well as punishment for those who would not conform, and the undermining of Indigenous religions and cultural values. Memmott (1990, p. 25) maintains that contributing factors such as those above have occurred over the last 100 years or more, and are responsible for the loss of "social [and family] control stemming from the erosion of values concerning traditional social structures, their underpinning ideologies, leadership qualities and the desirability of social control".

■ The geographical location of the research

Mornington Island or the island of *Kunbanbaa* is in the Wellesley Islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria, north-west Queensland, Australia. Mornington Island is a closed, geographically remote island and Aboriginal community (Figure 1). Mornington Island is slightly to the east of the Northern Territory border and to the north of Burketown. Other than government employees, contractors and family of the people living there everyone else intending to visit must gain permission from the Chief Executive Officer.

■ The research begins

In early August 1998, I was approached, at church, by six senior Mornington Island Aboriginal grannies, one of whom had been a headmistress and others who were experienced community teachers at the school. In their desperation to resume their roles as teachers of *Lardil* culture, language and Western literacy and numeracy they asked me to approach the school administration. When the grannies were not welcomed at the school they were very upset. This precipitated their need to "begin a university book about the dilemma" (1998, pers. comm., August).

One of the commonalities that the grannies had with me was that they had worked in the area where I was raised on sheep and cattle properties of far-north-west Queensland. As a *Darug* Aboriginal woman, I had also been adopted as a *kamaranginimerama*-skin woman by the Lanley-Ben-Hills family in 1998. Consequently these conversations were based on trust and similar worldviews, not ethnographic observations. As time passed the grannies and some male *Kunbanbaa* elders asked me to use these conversations as part of my PhD thesis. The grannies and male elders were keen to record their previous conversations (2000, pers. comm.,

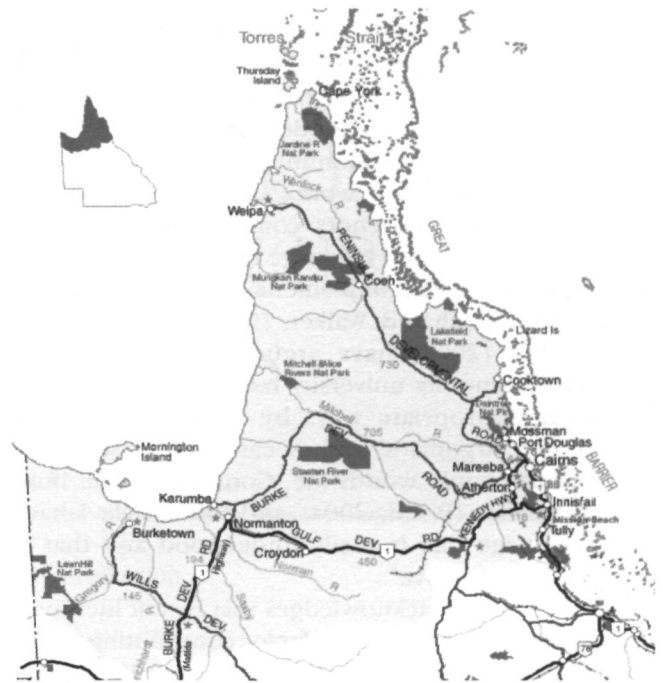


Figure 1. Map of Mornington Island, North-Western Queensland, Australia (<http://www.about-australia.com/queensland/tropical-north/destinations/mornington-island/>).

March). They gave me their permission to read their statements back regularly in discursive statements to other participants in group meetings to consider the progress of the thesis (2000, pers. comm., March). At the time of their interviews and conversations each research participant was asked their permission and at the beginning of the PhD thesis research they also signed consent forms which gave this permission. I read these consent forms out orally.

■ The methodological stance of the research

The elders' response was to narrate to me their history as teachers and the days of Reverend Belcher's cultural revival. Their narratives suggested better days before the state government had taken over the school in 1978, when many local Indigenous people had worked at the Church-run school as community teachers and cultural consultants (Memmott & Horsman, 1991). The grannies hoped that visiting teachers and the Aboriginal community could work together to achieve, "mutual respect and to teach the children properly" (1998, pers. comm., September). The senior members of *Kunbanbaa* have been determined to be visible and audible to authorities so that the young people of the community are educated enough to ensure their survival and progress in the face of worsening anomie.

It is with these sociological and educational aims in mind that I analysed the recursive, informal interviews and conversations with these senior members of the Mornington Island Aboriginal community. These interviews and narratives specifically explored relationships with non-Aboriginal people in the past

and potential social and political relationships that they visualised with the teachers and the school that could enhance the education prospects of the community's students. On most occasions the elders would request my presence at their house to discuss "our university book" (2000, pers. comm., September) or if they had urgent information to tell me that they would arrive at teacher Ken's unit, where I often resided, at any time. In both my research and analysis I have sought to embody explicitly the relationships of respect, appreciation of the beliefs and perceptions that the elders expected in their desired school-community relationships with visiting teachers.

■ Disrespect and humanitarianism

Freier (2006) cites the then Federal Health Minister, Tony Abbott, who maintained that:

The missionaries [did not have] short-term contracts. Service was their life, not just a business philosophy. Their sense of calling ... motivated them to commit their lives to Aborigines in ways that can seldom now be matched (cited in Freier, 2006).

The above statement correlates with the way the male elders and grannies perceived the missionary-teachers Reverend Belcher, Bill McClintock, Miss Bain and teacher Ken. While the male *Kunbanbaa* elders do not have positive statements to make about missionary Wilson and manager McCarthy, the grannies did favour Wilson. Belcher was universally liked and when grannie Margaret stated that, "We love Ken, just like old Belcher" (2001, pers. comm., January) she meant that his motivations were similarly humanitarian to the missionary Reverend Belcher. The Uniting Church was overthrown in 1978 when the Bjelke-Petersen government took over Aurukun and Mornington Island reserves. In the early 1970s a "dispute involving the state government, the church and the Aurukun community arose over bauxite mining on the Aurukun Aboriginal Reserve (Mommott & Horsman, 1991, p. 249). When the church opposed the alumina mining the state government took over Aurukun and its sister mission Mornington Island. After the Presbyterian Church had become the Uniting Church, its representatives had forgotten to write its new name onto its documents regarding the two Indigenous reserves. The government found this loophole. One male elder told me:

The Mornington Island community opposed the state takeover because we wanted to stay under church control. Many *Kunbanbaa* people speak up on television, but no one listen to us blackfellas (2000, pers. comm., September).

Clarke (2000) has suggested that teachers who work in remote communities may be unaware of the unwritten history of the community and the part non-Aboriginal community took in that history. The elders state that incoming teachers need to be aware of the history of the community, so they do not follow in the shoes of disrespectful teachers, but follow in the role of well loved government-employed teachers and missionary teachers.

Many of the interviews with the male elders, contained narratives full of feelings of anger about the negative events in the history of their island, such as their ceremonies being banned, their rights being stripped away, and their voices being rendered invisible. In this respect Havemann (2005) also has argued that in sections 25, 51 (xxvi) and 127 of the Australian Constitution of 1900 "Indigenous people with their place-based, sustainable, state free social order have been chronic obstacles to colonising modernity, to be overcome by violence concealed behind legalities" (Havemann, 2005, p. 57). This reflects Evans (1999) writing which suggests that Aboriginal people are popularly stereotyped as "irresponsible children or at worst utterly dispensable vermin" (p. 134). More recently Dunn (2001) maintained that such deficit thinking still has currency.

The male elders declare that they largely lost agency in the early days of the missionaries. In the case of Mornington Island *Kulthangar* and *Birdibir* told me that "the Aboriginal elders lost their power in 1917 when ten initiated men of high degree were sent to Stewart Creek jail" (2010, pers. comm., March).

McKnight (2002, p. 3) has defended the Mornington Islanders by arguing:

When commenting on the behaviour of the Mornington Islanders White people frequently claim, "They only have themselves to blame". This is a gross misunderstanding and it conveniently exonerates the whites of their responsibility. The simple fact is that if the Whites had not appeared ... the Mornington Islanders and other Aboriginal [people] would not be in the predicament they now are in.

McKnight (2002, p. 2) further maintains that "The shire was staffed by careerists who unlike the missionaries knew nothing about the Mornington Islanders' [lives and culture] and seemed to have little desire to learn".

Back (2004, p. 2) has also suggested that visiting workers should work and live with a community perspective, when he suggests that many non-Aboriginal people who come to work in Aboriginal communities and "groups operative within the community were not working towards a common community-defined outcome, but all had individual and distinct agendas". With the advent of embedding "Indigenous Perspectives" subjects in all education

faculties at universities (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007) pre-service teachers will be well aware that when they teach in Indigenous communities, the community has one set of socio-cultural expectations and as government employees they will have another set of rules.

Elders (such as *Kulthangar*, J. Williams, *Wunbun* and *Kurnungkur*) suggest these agendas are related to "money, rather than really caring for the kids and strengthening [local Aboriginal] culture" (2002, pers. comm., May). Teacher Ken told me, "The elders still wish to make the rules in the community, just as elders in many Western Australian communities do" (2010, pers. comm., March).

Relatedness, connectedness and a holistic Aboriginal worldview

The grannies and male elders emphasised the need for teachers to mix socially in the community and form caring, compassionate and respectful relationships with the senior Indigenous members of the community (2001, pers. comm., January). *Kulthangar* stated that this need for teachers to have "caring relationships with families and respectful relationships with the elders is part of one really big [*Kunbanbaa* and *Borrooloola* Aboriginal] Law" (1998, pers. comm., August). The community has a history of adopting outsiders (Memmott & Horsman, 1991; McKnight, 1999) and this custom epitomises the Indigenous worldview of connectedness and relatedness in their intentions and behaviour.

A holistic worldview

This holistic worldview is emphasised by Back (2004, p. 1), a health researcher working in a remote community, with the *Martuwanka* people, who maintained that:

There is limited available research that explores Aboriginal health from a holistic cultural perspective (defined as healthy body, land and spirit) and few programs apply wide intervention strategies to impact the environmental, physical and mental health of the people of a remote Aboriginal community.

This holistic approach to health also applies to education, because as elder Roger Kelly states, "In our world everything is connected and related" (2002, pers. comm., May).

Teacher Ken recently confirmed this worldview:

The kids never came to school if they were sick, family members were sick, a funeral was on, ceremonies were on. Health, education, mental health, justice, language and culture all tie in here and in other communities where I have

taught. You can't separate them (2010, pers. comm., March).

Guidance Officers and Learning Support Officers in schools are also aware that health effects a child's learning ability and that abuse and neglect can make children ill. And as Atkinson (2002) noted traumatic historical events in the Australian Aboriginal world, the theft of traditional culture and the enforced dormitory conditions has caused transgenerational trauma. Milroy (2005) also maintained that when considering the impacts of post-colonial and colonial periods (1788-1960) have had on Aboriginal people from a psychological perspective, the historical denial of Aboriginal humanity, existence and identity emerge as critical themes. Ralph et al. (2006) also state that trans-generational trauma symptomology includes self-harm, suicide ideation and destructive behaviour and is related to Aboriginal youth suicide ideation, trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ralph et al., 2006).

Although psychiatrist Cawte (1972) wrote about the mental health of many people in the Wellesley Islands, he wrote from a Westernised view rather than emphasising cross-cultural psychology as Reser (1991) does. Reser (1991, p. 218) states "the issue of Aboriginal mental health is embedded in a large set of questions relating to culture and cultural differences, historical events, social and cultural change, and coping". American psychiatrist Virginia Huffer's (1980) time with Elsie Roughsey and other Aboriginal women was more sympathetically written. My study was conducted 20 years later where the substance abuse, especially drugs, butane and petrol sniffing among the young people on Mornington Island had become quite severe. Reser (1991) states feelings such as grief, melancholy, happiness, shame, worry, homesickness and anger may all be seen, as not only sources of distress, but potential crises of illness. Self in an Aboriginal context is seen to incorporate one's family and extended clan group; with a complex of relational bonds and reciprocal obligations (Reser, 1991). These factors are relevant then to Aboriginal mental health and well-being, and their loss or fragmentation will lead to mental ill health. One can deduce from Huffer's (1980), Reser's (1991), Atkinson's (1994), Milroy's (2005) and Ralph et al. (2006) studies why the male elders and grannies emphasise teaching relatedness as part of the school curriculum and emphasising relatedness between the teachers and community to cushion the impacts of trauma in the community.

Listening to the community

Godfrey et al. (2001) argue that often school and educational system authorities fail to listen to the complaints of Indigenous parents, workers or students.

Calma (2005), Hagan (2005), and Vick (2007) also all have argued that relationships between government agents, such as teachers and community workers and the members of Indigenous communities have reflected huge power differences rather than a holistic sense of community.

Like Back (2004), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Calma (2008) and the New South Wales Department of Communities (2009) emphasise that government workers who deal with children and their parents should also deal with broader cultural, social and community patterns and agendas. Calma (2008) also argues that social workers, like most government workers, also have to contend with the fact that as part of government welfare departments they probably do not have a very good reputation in the community and it may be challenging to build cooperative relationships.

Thus the statement of some senior members of *Kunbanbaa* community that, "We think it fair enough to want to know who teach our children" (2000, pers. comm., September), which fuels Latham's (1999) and Calma's (2005) assertions are also relevant. Similarly in 1987, a group of Aboriginal women from Kimberley in Western Australia suggested, "*Gadiya* never give *blakbala* chance before to talk up for what kinda education they want for their kids" (cited in Theis, 1987 p. 1). *Kunbanbaa* elders argue that good relationships between community members and government agents equalise, to a certain degree, the vast power ratio imbalance that has existed between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous colonisers.

Kamara (2007) and Sarra (2003) both argue that a successful Aboriginal school needs non-Indigenous teachers to listen to the suggestions of Aboriginal educational assistants and local respected Indigenous community members. In this regard, the words of elder Larry Lanley, a former Mornington Island Mayor, songman and dancer, are very pertinent. He stated in 1980:

Many changes have been pushed on us [by Europeans]. They do not understand our ways, but give us their laws and their schools and tell us what they think is best for European people. We have no say. Europeans do not listen (cited in Memmott & Horseman, 1991, p. 367).

However, the elders of Mornington Island are not alone in their beliefs and expectations that Indigenous students want and like caring teachers who are culturally sensitive (Partington, 1997; Bourke et al., 1993). Martinez-Brawley (1990, p. 219) sees "community, with its need for affectivity and local ties as an alternative to emphases on individualism". Morgan and Slade (1998) maintain that the Aboriginal cultural worldview situates individuals as plural extensions of the community and the land, but

they argue that for non-Aboriginal Australians personal identity is individualistic. In this respect my research findings explore the story of a government-employed teacher who fitted the paradigm of a caring, humanitarian, church-going and culturally-sensitive community teacher.

■ Productive relationships can prevent truancy

If classes at school are relevant, with opportunities for real life learning and teachers begin to have good relationships with families and senior members of the community, they would learn all of the reasons for truancy and the dynamics of the local community. But some elders told me, "Truancy is not just solved by getting the kids to school and by good teachers who teach interesting subjects" (2002, pers. comm., May). I was told by one elder that truancy is caused:

when there is bullying and teasing at the school; kids are homeless; they substance abuse; there are ceremonies and funerals on; students are away at other communities; students are "out bush"; students have to look after family; family or kids are ill; kids are tired from having no bed at home and being tired from watching videos all night (2000, pers. comm., September).

Although 25 percent of Aboriginal children have excellent attendance patterns, attendance rates at Mornington Island School at 65 percent in 2009 (Queensland Government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, 2009) are some of the worst in Queensland.

Some male elders and grannies argued that there were many ways of preventing truancy. Their narratives suggest that not only did teacher Ken connect with the community to encourage students to come to school, but he continually empowered the students and strengthened their identities. Mayor Cecil Goodman's mother told me:

That boy Ken was adopted after two years, by the Hills family. His classes were so interesting that all his students came to school everyday. He knew the kids and they trusted him. He was strict, but popular. The kids really listened to him and learned. He had homework classes and lots of football. He taught reading, writing and arithmetic, but they also went on trips to other states. He made them feel special. That's because he knew the island, the history, the culture, the families, where to fish, the tides, all that. He was in touch with the country. He had taught at other Aboriginal schools in the outback, so he knew about bush people and bush ways. We need teachers like that; teachers who make the kids like school (2001, pers. comm., April).

Ngerrawurn also suggested that Ken's students did not truant because, "Ken[']s a real good hunter. Even in these days of television and videos, hunting is still a big thing. The kids look up to him" (2001, pers. comm., September).

Kulthangar and *Bulthuku* also raised the issue of truancy when they spoke to me about productive relationships between the community and the school. They maintained, "If families don't like their kid's teacher they don't send their kids to school. They don't send their kids if there is bullying at the school either" (2001, pers. comm., January).

When Noel Pearson discussed the issue of truancy in *The Australian* (2009), he stressed that ensuring children went to school could open the way to tackling many more difficult issues in Indigenous affairs such as substance abuse, violence and young Indigenous people being incarcerated. Pearson maintained, "It's all to do with getting them at school, keeping them at school" (cited in Steketee & Karvelas, 2009, p. 1). Bourke et al. (2000, p. 9) also agree:

that schools be encouraged to provide opportunities for Indigenous elders, past students, and other community members, to be involved in teaching programs, and the development of a supportive atmosphere for Indigenous students. Role models within the Indigenous community should be encouraged to become mentors to Indigenous students, especially to those who have attendance difficulties.

■ Good teachers need to be here for a long time

Principal Neil Gibson (cited in Curtain, 2008) at *Minyerri* Community School (three hours east of Katherine in the Northern Territory, Australia) puts the success of his students down to his high teacher retention rate (2008). The belief that teachers should stay for long periods of time so students and families in outback communities feel comfortable with them is not unrealistic. "How long will you stay?" is a common question that outback employers ask potential employees. Gibson (cited in Curtain, 2008, p. 1) stated that, "We have a core of teachers that have been here two, three, four years. My wife and I have been here nearly eight years. I think that continuity sort of helps too as they get to know you as a person and as a teacher".

This view is echoed by senior *Kunbanbaa* men who believed that "good" teachers really wanted to live in a community for a long time. They stated a number of times, "We want teachers who really want to be here and like the people here" (2000, pers. comm., January).

Kulthangar also said in 2002 that teachers should stay on the island for a number of years: "Look at Ken.

He bin here, what, four, five years ... Ken knows all the families in the community. I see him visiting with them on the weekends and after school and they trust him because of it" (2002, pers. comm., May).

Teacher Ken had taught previously at St George and Longreach School of the Air. In both communities he taught non-Indigenous and Indigenous families and visited their families regularly. He told me:

It's part of the job. People like to know how their kids are going and part of the bush ethic is being sociable. My kids went to school out here. My wife and I were part of the church community; she was a nurse at the hospital and we spent a lot of our spare time out on properties. We got to know most of the community in both places and it was the same on Mornington (2010, pers. comm., March).

Teacher Ken became part of the community and by being adopted into the kinship system of the island as *Balyarini* skin and *Ngerrawurn* totem, teacher Ken became a brother to all the *Ngerrawurn* brothers, brother to *Kulthangar*, and uncle and grandfather to many children. By the act of adoption he was related to all the families on the community and all the students. This cultural incorporation meant the families and students respected him.

In regard to his cultural incorporation teacher Ken argued that "two of the other male teachers were adopted at the same time. It made a huge difference to their teaching. I wish the other teachers could have seen that" (2010, pers. comm., March).

Teacher Ken also went to the elders and grannies for advice and they visited him when they were concerned about the students. Ken's relationship with the custodians of community knowledge circumvented serious problems like stealing, suicide ideation, bullying and substance abuse, especially butane and Mortein sniffing. This way the community could take collective action. In this respect teacher Ken, and the two other male teachers who were adopted, mirrored the relationships that were fostered by non-Indigenous university students and researchers at Purga with the Indigenous Knowledge Research project (Sheehan & Walker, 2001). As Sheehan and Walker state:

researchers must engage authentically and appropriately with the community. Professionalism in the Western sense has no place in Indigenous Knowledge Research. The notion of ethical distance from the subjects of research just does not fit with IKR projects. To instigate Indigenous Knowledge you must be accepted into the community context (2001, pp. 13-14).

Boylan and McSwan's (1998) extensive quantitative research suggested that long-staying rural teachers conformed to local socio-cultural ethic, just as teacher Ken did by becoming part of the community. According to Sharplin (2002, p. 4) the most common social and personal concerns about teaching in rural and remote locations for pre-service teachers was "uncertainty about the experience of socialisation into the community". Issues of socio-cultural dislocation have been identified by Lunn (1997), Carlson (1990) and Yarrow et al. (1999) as factors influencing the level of satisfaction of rural teachers. Sharplin (2002) argues that teachers from urban areas experience difficulty in learning the types of behaviour expected in rural settings and adjusting to community expectations. In the past there has been an historical lack of communication between Indigenous people and incoming teachers and researchers (Sheehan & Walker, 2001); yet now Indigenous perspectives are being embedded into all university courses (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007) therefore new teachers should understand Indigenous protocols and the rules of community development and engagement.

Although I maintain that the local socio-cultural ethics of every Indigenous community are different and localised, at Mornington Island, the mayor and head ceremonial elder, *Kulthangar*, had a cultural expectation that the school teachers should come to seek his advice. As a collective body the community had an essentialist memory of teachers from the church being caring, helpful and community minded and government teachers as being standoffish (2000, pers. comm., November) which was also added to the belief that elders worldwide were the teachers. As one elder stated, "Many young teachers were not aware of this clash of cultures or of the history of non-Indigenous – Indigenous relations in Australia" (2010, pers. comm., March).

The belief that the elders are the "keepers of the Law, the moral and legal leaders of the community, the custodians of all knowledge and the educators, enforcers of right and wrong and the communicators" (2010, pers. comm., May) is always present in their minds. This view of elders as the primary teachers and the custodians of ancestral knowledge that guide the ways of their people is in accord with Indigenous beliefs all over the world (Cajette, 2000; Suzuki & Knudson, 1992; Sheehan & Walker, 2001; Smith, 1999; Martin, 2002). Like the Western Australian Independent Schools and the Purga elders Working Group, the elders and grannies of Mornington Island still cling to and envision a future for their children which does not include unemployment, racism and violence (2002, pers. comm., January; also see Lucey, 1998; Smith, 1998; Sheehan & Walker, 2001).

■ We need to get back to Belcher Days

Historically, the male elders of Mornington Island perceived themselves as losing their authority from 1917 when the Reverend Robert Hall was killed by one of *Kulthangar*'s old uncles, *Gidegal* and his relatives were sent to jail for collaborating (2001, pers. comm., January). *Kulthangar* told me that "much spiritual knowledge was lost with those men, because we Windward men are the powerful men – Big Men. Big Men means elders who hold real important knowledge for our people and who receive big dreams from the great creation ancestors" (2001, pers. comm., January). Although, the Reverend Belcher took over as manager in 1948 and allowed the culture programs to be taught at the school and initiations to be reintroduced, *Kulthangar*, the Head Ceremonial elder and Prince Escott's son, a *Kangalida* elder whose father had taught culture at the school, told me that "much sacred knowledge had been lost in the McCarthy years [in the 1940s] when our ceremonies and initiations were banned" (2002, pers. comm., May). *Kulthangar* told me, "When missionary Wilson came in 1918, the head missionary had become the headmaster and in 1978 the principal of the government run school had taken over the power of the missionaries and the elders" (1955, pers. comm., January). But Memmott (1979, p. 332) concluded that the differential treatment of girls and boys growing up from the days of Wilson onwards "has resulted in a sexist asymmetry of traditional knowledge in the contemporary generation" where men carry the majority of such knowledge, but it has also created division in the community. According to Dalley and Memmott (2010), girls had to stay at the mission until they married a man their own age, but boys left school at Grade 5 when they went back to the bush to be mentored by the old men. Dalley and Memmott (2010) explain that this was, in part, a Queensland Government sanctioned recognition of the significance of cultural development (where boys were allowed to be taught "traditional bush ways" by their male relatives) but girls were protected from the advances of older Aboriginal men who had a number of wives (Bleakley 1937, p. 1; White 1994, p. 65).

At a meeting at male elder *Chuloo* Ben's home to discuss my thesis, many elders asserted that the students are confused as to role models and this has caused fragmentation, shame and lack of respect for their own culture (2002, pers. comm., November).

Earlier *Ngerrawurn*'s mother, one of the grannies, who had been a teacher at the school for a number of decades, told me, "You know, Ken, Paul, Dan and Seamus and those other old headmasters like Belcher and McClintock are the only teachers we know. Those teachers should come out and mix [in the community]" (2001, pers. comm., January). Six months before, after the language and culture program had been scrapped at the local school by a new principal, *Ngerrawurn*'s

mother had said quite vehemently, "Are you talking to them [the teachers] girl, explaining things. You must talk to them [about how we need to teach Aboriginal culture and language to our own children]" (2001, pers. comm., January).

The elders have continually striven to relate to and incorporate outsiders into their community. In this respect they told me:

We knew McKnight, Belcher and McClintock a long time. We mentioned them because they were close to the community. We trusted them. We adopted them. We had respect for them. They learned our ways. They used to have a cup of tea with us and a yarn and go camping and hunting with us (2002, pers. comm., May).

All of the research participants made it clear that part of a teacher's "job" was to have "good [social] relationships" with people in the community, so they could be trusted, respected by the community, and be interconnected with the community.

■ Cultural competency classes for teachers

The study of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural competence for non-Aboriginal people who work with the Aboriginal people, as teachers, health professionals, welfare workers and police, is becoming a normalised part of university degrees and training courses and government legislation. The document entitled "Working with Aboriginal People and Communities: A Practice Resource" (2009) written by the Aboriginal Services Branch of the New South Wales Department of Community Services (2009, p. 6) emphasises cultural competence as being:

Respect for elders, the land, animals and ancestors are fundamental aspects of Aboriginal culture ... Visiting workers need to offer and earn respect, particularly in dealings with community elders and leaders. Elders and community leaders not only hold key community knowledge, but they also have a great deal of influence over when, how and if a community will work with those from outside.

The senior *Kunhaamendaa* argued strongly for cultural awareness classes to be run by the elders rather than the school. The elders also emphasised that the teachers come to the island for reasons of compassion and because they enjoy being with Aboriginal people. When I last visited the island in 2004 all these conditions were part of the "teacher package" (2004, pers. comm., November).

When I asked Ken for details of the Cultural Competence Program he mentioned that it had been begun in 2004 after urging from the Shire Council:

Each teacher was allotted to a certain family. They had to learn about skin names, kinship groups, the totems and story places. They had to learn what special plant, animal, fish or spirit belonged at a story place. They had to start learning *Lardil* language and watch when the elders and grannies taught art and dance at the school (2010, pers. comm., March).

This program helped the teachers' socio-cultural integration in the community and understanding the children. It also helped the teachers respect the culture, the people and enjoy new aspects to their lives. Ken told me that *Ngerrawurn's* mother and his *balyarini* sisters taught him *Lardil* language regularly and he said that most of the teachers enjoyed their language lessons (2010, pers. comm., March). In 2002 *Kulthangar* and his wife *Bulibuku* told me she would have to learn *Lardil*. They told me that it was the only way to speak to the land and to get permission from country I had never been to before (2002, pers. comm., January). *Kulthangar* continued:

Language gives us an identity. Our skin names are *Lardil*, our fish, our spirit people, our totems. It keeps our culture and land strong. I'll tell you this, When the old *Kaidilt* ladies go over to Bentinck Island they only speak [*Kaidilt*] language (2003, pers. comm., April).

The elders suggest a model of exemplary teaching. Teacher Ken was a friendly, middle aged man who had taught at two outback schools and had engaged with those communities as part of his professional practice. He was a regular church goer, non-drinker and he shopped locally, which meant he was seen regularly. He fished at the local wharf with a fishing line rather than in an expansive boat, which would have alienated members of the local community. His ownership of an old Hilux rather than a new vehicle also presented a picture of public humility and visibility. These characteristics endeared him to the families in the community.

While some teachers objected to going to church, the church in the small community was a gathering place rather than a place to indoctrinate religion. It was a place where people shared information, shared nourishing food, laughed and relaxed. It was also a place where community members had a chance to ask teacher Ken and the other teachers who attended about the children they taught and the parents, uncles, aunts and grandparents in turn told the teachers useful information and decided upon new programs.

Trusting and respectful relationships between senior members of an Aboriginal community and visiting teachers can often take years to develop. This trust is only earned by consistent socialising with the community over a number of years.

Another factor was "to walk around the community to see what everybody wants" (2002, pers. comm., May). The emphasis here was on "walking around, not driving so Ken was not seen as a snob" (2000, pers. comm., March). In this respect, *Kulthangar* and I were talking about teacher Ken, when *Kulthangar* observed: "When I see him walking up the street, at the shop, at the jetty, I notice everyone says, 'Hello'. People trust him now" (2000, pers. comm., March).

Teacher Ken was also fortunate that Larry Lanley's son, *Jekarija* was his educational assistant at the school in 1998 and Ken taught *Jekarija*'s two sons at the school. This was a fruitful, reciprocal relationship which benefitted the school, students and community. As initiated men, *Jekarija* and his uncles, *Ngerrawurn* and Clement were some of the senior men who guided Ken's cultural and Aboriginal Law-based journey.

It was a cultural journey that was watched carefully by the community, although teacher Ken did not realise this in the early stages. *Ngerrawurn*'s mother told me, "New teachers are always watched carefully by the community in remote communities, when they arrive, because they stand out" (2002, pers. comm., January). Teacher Ken arrived in January 1998 and within a few weeks *Ngerrawurn*, an Aboriginal man, in his 50s, the same age as Ken, became a regular visitor. After a few months *Ngerrawurn* invited teacher Ken out to his country on the east of the island. He taught teacher Ken many aspects of the local culture, such as how to spear fish and crabs. Teacher Ken learned about the seasons and what fish and crabs to throw back. *Ngerrawurn* taught him how to recognise female and undersized crabs and fish that he had to throw back and how to recognise certain fish in the four seasons that was secret information. He learned how to hunt for wallabies and lizards and even gather the panja bulbs, waterlily bulbs and waterlily flowers in the swamps that were tasty vegetables.

It was not until 2001 that *Ngerrawurn* finally asked his mother, one of the senior grannies who had been married to an initiated elder, whether the family could adopt Ken. Granny Margaret thought about it for a few months. *Ngerrawurn* and his many *balyarini* (skin) brothers waited silently for her decision. One day, she said, "My son will you pick me up for church!"

The whole family smiled and Ken answered, "Of course, Mum, what time."

This conversation indicated that *Ngerrawurn*'s mother had finally accepted him into their extended family just as she had been accepted and adopted when she arrived in *Kunbanbaa* in 1930, at the age of nine, from Nicholson River, "because my father had just died and mother wanted my sister and I to be educated up here by my uncle, Big Barney and the school up here. The school at Burketown wouldn't allow black kids, only white" (1998, pers. comm., November). In return Ken was then expected to act as her son in helping her around the house, but he was also expected to learn

Lardil language from his adopted mother. Through teacher Ken's friendship with her son, *Ngerrawurn* and his eventual adoption the grannies and the community became more involved with the school. *Ngerrawurn*'s mother told me:

You know, that boy, my son, comes down and chops firewood for me at night. *Ngerrawurn* has taught him to hunt and spear crabs and fish. He sits down with me and Gloria and is learning to spin hair to make hats. He's learning how to speak *Lardil* too, just as my uncle Big Barney taught me over the years. This way our little grandchildren will learn too (2001, pers. comm., September).

As he learned these skills families and students trusted teacher Ken and knew that he was making an effort to be part of the community.

■ The Fencing and Cattle Work Educational Program

Teacher Ken went with a group of teenage post-compulsory students to Katherine in the Northern Territory for a course on fencing and cattle work in late 2000 and he gained a new standing with the young men of the school and the elders as a bushman. As part of his post-compulsory program, which Ken began, he taught young people in their twenties how to pass a drivers license and how to fill in forms. Teacher Ken told me about this trip:

Twenty post-compulsory students all gained their licenses. The men passed competency tests on the road gang to read gauges, fill mileage in, fill in log books to show they had checked oil, water, diesel, brakes, tyre pressure, hydraulic oil levels, wheel nuts, air cleaners and damage before they began to drive the machinery. These young people had to get heavy machinery tickets to work in the mines. They also gained confidence skills (2010, pers. comm., March).

Teacher Ken's success is in accord with Howard and Perry's (2005) research, which suggests good relationships between the community and the school, enhances Aboriginal students' ability to do mathematics. Teacher Ken added:

Four of the girls gained work with the council. Five of the young men and two girls gained work in mines. Three of the young men gained work on the road gang. One male and one female gained work as park rangers. Two of the students gained part time work in child care (2010, pers. comm., March).

Teacher Ken's comments is consistent with the research that reveals a drop in retention as Indigenous students

move toward the post-compulsory years (Long et al., 1999; Schwab, 1999), but Indigenous students are also over-represented in vocationally-oriented school courses (Gray et al., 2000).

Teacher Ken also told me:

The students learned some curriculum from the old Grannies' patient instruction. The Grannies had been teaching for fifty years and knew all the students in the community. I also watched the old men quietly teach dance and language over and over again out in the bush. They never laughed when someone made a mistake. I learned culturally appropriate pedagogy from them (2010, pers. comm., March).

Similarly to what Schwab (1999) describes, teacher Ken and another male adopted teacher taught with the male elders in a team, teaching in a style that supported the students cultural heritage and by providing course structures and materials that fitted their preferred learning styles. Yet teacher Ken and the male elders were firm about attendance and participation and "students were not allowed to complete their studies without fulfilling highly specific industry-defined requirements" (Schwab, 1999, p. 8).

Teacher Ken's cross-cultural training assisted him in being a successful teacher in a remote Aboriginal community. Bourke et al. (2000, p. 8) also state that there is a:

need to provide practically oriented and meaningful educational activities for adolescent Indigenous males, particularly in remote areas, where it is seen to be appropriate for such education to be provided in a situation removed or segregated from the normal school setting; "school is only for kids" – being a typical response from traditionally oriented male students approaching or following initiation.

■ Exemplar relationships with teachers in the past

For many Aboriginal people their past history influences the present. For the Mornington Islanders, the days of the cultural revival which missionary Doug Belcher began in the 1950s were positive times and in those times the *Kunbanamendaa* loved their caring, Presbyterian teachers (Memmott & Horsman, 1992). These teachers included headmaster Bill McClintock who instigated a great number of school reforms and made sure elders and Grannies were employed by the school to teach language, culture, bush foods, dance, art and genealogy.

The elders say there have been at least five exemplary school administrators in the past. These administrators included the male and female elders as

respected school advisors and culture teachers. After the administrators "left the community the culture programs stopped, the records were lost, culture materials were lost and the school was seen as a government building outside the community" (2002, pers. comm., April). Unfortunately, when culturally conscious principals left the culture programs were no longer continued and these principals did not pass their knowledge onto the next person. This information shows how important it is to have continuity of records and staff. When the elders began the culture program for the male initiates in 2002, the elders were adamant that they keep records.

Kulthangar told me this story about his favourite teacher, who taught him in the early 1950s, to illustrate his idea of the perfect teacher:

You know white people must learn that for us the past, present and future are one. They don't know our past and they forget about [the] future. When we talk about relationships with [non-Aboriginal] teachers we think about the present, but I think about my good old teacher Miss Bain. She loved us. She used to come and play with us after school, visit our families in the afternoons and bring us good things to eat. And she go out with us camping on weekends. I loved that good, old lady. We adopt her into our family (2002, pers. comm., April).

This is a story that situates this female teacher, as a family member and as a friendly, fun-loving caregiver. This dedicated teacher becomes part of a family and is adopted, just like Belcher and McClintock were. This model is more a "bush" or outback model where teachers become part of a community and women teachers marry into local families.

■ Conclusion

The *Kunbanamendaa* elders cite Miss Bain, McClintock, Belcher and Ken as exemplary teachers who restored the agency of the elders and the community and consulted with them regularly. Teacher Ken in both relationship and practice, in their view, had respect for Aboriginal Law, for the spiritual and material culture that it supports and for the elders as custodians and embodiments of the Law. Rather than a paternalistic view that it is unhealthy for visiting workers to be "enmeshed" in the community, the views of the elders are clear in their expectations that we are all interconnected and the teachers and elders must work as a team for the common good of the community. The elders and the community asked that teachers and other community workers have caring, compassionate, respectful attitudes towards the students, parents and community with whom they find work. All they ask is that the teachers

recognise that they are guests in the community, that they consult the elders on matters of pedagogy and curriculum and that they show respect for the people and culture. The elders consistently asked over the years that I listened to their stories and that the teachers listen and learn from the elders and older members of the community, male and female.

In many ways teacher Ken bridged the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational cultures, because he accepted and enjoyed being part of an Indigenous epistemology and ontology that was deeply spiritual, collective, holistic, interdependent and connected to the past. Therefore, he worked with the elders and grannies to encourage the students to love their culture. As the elders told Ken, "We're the mob you should be listening to!", so he listened, learned and respectfully went back to them regularly for guidance in pedagogy and curriculum.

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