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Disciplining the Islander in formal education

Tenebris Ad Lucem — From Darkness to Light.
(School motto on Thursday Island until 1985)

Up until the 1950s it was not uncommon to express the position that Australia's Indigenous people reached a point of intellectual development around adolescence where they could progress no more. The early records from the archives of the New South Wales Department of Education (in 1948 and later in 1955), for instance, cite 'research' to support a position that there was 'common agreement that the intelligence of Aboriginal people is below that of the white population' (cited in Fletcher, 1989, p. 274). This served well to reinforce a community-wide standpoint that Australian Indigenous learners could not rise above 'Fourth Class' standard (Third Class standard in Queensland).

In the Torres Strait, this standard was referred to by Islanders as 'the mark' and the curriculum was systemised during the 1920s.

> …to impart a knowledge of English, to develop intelligence, to make better what is good in customs and practices, to eliminate what is objectionable, to give a broader outlook and generally to fit these people to live their Island life in a more civilised setting. (Queensland Department of Public Instruction cited in Williamson, 1994, p. 100)

However, by the early 1960s, there were the beginnings of a marked shift in this position. The New South Wales Department of Education's position once again reflects this:

> Research has indicated that the pupils are of average intelligence, and that social deprivation and depressed environment are the reasons for initial retardation than low intelligence; Aboriginal children are

> now seen as disadvantaged members of the general community rather than a substandard racial group. (NSW Department of Education cited in Fletcher, 1989, p. 274)

This shift emerged alongside the wider post-Second World War human rights discourse that underpinned global decolonisation, rather than as any outcome of educational research. Fletcher, in an extensive study of the New South Wales education archival records, could not find any direct educational reference points for the department's shift, indeed reporting that 'there had been no research on the intelligence of Aboriginal children which could have produced such a marked change' (1989, pp. 274–75). However, he did find an early reference by the Teachers Federation to a 'UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] statement that there was no proof that racial groups differed in intelligence or temperament' (p. 275); and noted that the position taken 'had been influenced more by doctrinaire ideas on civil rights and equal rights for all...and it was becoming fashionable to accept that a 'lower' environment rather than a lower racial intelligence could fully explain the school performance' (p. 275).

There was, however, much theorising going on at this time in other parts of the world. Ryan (1971), writing on the African-American context, outlines the shift in thinking by American psychologists towards environmental factors to explain intellectual development. The following extracts provide examples of the deployment of 'unquestioned knowledge' that positions the practices of the middle class as normative to the 'deficit' practices of 'lower classes'. Clear parallels to the inscription of 'savages' in a secondary relation to the 'normative' civilised Europeans are evident in this deployment of 'knowledge' of lower class 'others'.

> ...lower-lower class parental patterns, compared to middle class ones, tend to be antithetical to a child's positive mental health... With generally less ego strength (lower self-esteem), the very poor individual is apt to have greater need than his middle class counterpart for security-giving psychological defenses...The subcultural patterns of this group... suggest that their life style...might be termed (within the middle class frame of reference), as immature in a number of respects, such as their greater tendency toward impulsivity, lack of goal commitment, magical thinking, physical learning and behavioral styles, low frustration tolerance, concrete attitudes, and so on. (Chilman cited in Ryan, 1971, pp. 147–48)

> The low SES (socio-economic status) has (1) a weak superego (2) a weak ego, with lack of control or frustration tolerance, (3) a negative, distrustful, suspicious character with poor interpersonal relationships, (4) strong feelings of inferiority, low-self esteem, fear of ridicule and (5) a tendency to act out problems, with violent expression of hostility and extrapunitive tendencies. (Langner & Michaels cited in Ryan, 1971, p. 145)

> ...to deal professionally with poor people...one must take account of their significant characteristics, particularly as these seem strange or hard to contend with...the deprived are oriented toward the present and, to a lesser extent, the immediate past...the lower class person is handicapped in his efforts to understand change, and he may fear new adjustments...the disadvantaged person is likely to meet difficulties by adjusting to them rather than by attempting to overcome them. (Freedman & Kaplan cited in Ryan, 1971, p. 145)

> ...if lower class culture is to be changed and lower class people are eventually to be enabled to take advantage of 'opportunities' to participate in conventional society and to earn their own way in it, this change can only come about through a change in the social and ecological situation to which lower class people must adapt. (Rainwater cited in Ryan, 1971, pp. 134–35)

However, Ryan contested psychology's inscriptions of the socially and educationally disadvantaged as one more disposed to absolving the role of Western institutional and disciplinary practices. In his view, the shift in effect 'blames the victim', apologises for and exonerates the role of the state as well as authorises and reinforces 'educated' middle-class values as the unproblematic normative standard.

Ryan was not alone. Freire's text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), drawing on the Brazilian context, saw a very direct relationship between the state and the people, as oppressor and the oppressed. He claimed that the shift in the psychological position was more to do with 'changing the consciousness of oppressed, not the situation that oppresses them' (Simone de Beauvoir cited in Freire, 1972, p. 47). In England, Cultural Studies — through Hoggart's text, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), and Thompson's seminal work on *The Making of the English Working Class* (1978) — came to focus even more closely on relations of power and how they come to shape cultural practices. Together with Stuart Hall,

these theorists re-visioned the environmental influences as a historical phenomenon of changing elements in 'new times'.

In Australia, from the 1960s there was an increasing focus on academic research in Australian Indigenous issues beyond the traditional fields of inquiry in anthropology, archaeology and linguistics. Research related to Australian Indigenous people further accelerated under the Whitlam government in the 1970s and drew academic research and governments into a closer collaboration in instituting reform in Australian Indigenous affairs. Not just the amount of knowledge produced about Australian Indigenous societies or issues increased. New ways of understanding what it meant to be 'Indigenous' in modernising times harnessed more and more of the social sciences as a means to build explanatory models and suggest remedies for eliminating a range of inequities.

So the social inequity that was the prior accepted basis of the education system of Australia's Indigenous people — indeed of the whole of what we now generally refer to as the service provision context — now assumed a central focus in research. Research was well positioned within the discursive shifts underway in the international discourses associated with human rights, equal rights and civil rights, in the developing social sciences, and in Federal government policy reform. This discursively framed a way of understanding 'Indigenous problems' as synonymous with 'disadvantage', 'lack', 'cultural deprivation' and 'cultural difference'. Except for concepts of cultural deprivation, which was quickly reworked as cultural difference, these themes came to dominate policy and practice — to inform both explanation and remedy for past educational failure and the general Islander 'predicament'.

The discursive and material circumscription of the preceding century, when missionaries, scientists and government had used racially-based arguments to rationalise their decisions to separate and protect Islanders from the external influences encroaching on their living environments passed into 'history'. To redress the legacy, by 1971 the shift underway in the disciplines of education, psychology and sociology disposed thinking towards a new scrutiny of social and cultural practice, to develop 'new' ways of knowing Islanders in order to understand what impeded educational progress. To understand generally why Australia's Indigenous people were failing to 'derive benefit from their schooling', investigations came to be directed at '…forces outside the formal education system which seriously affect[ed] the progress of Aborigines within that system…[including] the home, the community, the peer group and the personality and cognitive characteristics of the Aboriginal pupil himself'. (Watts, 1971, p. i).

The policy shifts that occurred post-war from assimilation to integration and then to self-determination, ensured this research did not lead to 'changing' us as Australia's Indigenous peoples. Rather, more knowledge of social and cultural practices was needed in the 1970s to understand what sorts of clashes or barriers impeded progress in formal schooling.

By the 1980s, when education in the Torres Strait eventually became a focus for reform by the Queensland government, the way that Islanders were understood in terms of their social context and as learners influenced the details and extent of curriculum reform. In a very circular way, separate, and now with hindsight, meaningless (rather than substandard or insufficient) schooling was to give way to equal but necessarily different schooling. As a result there was much more research on Torres Strait Islander education (e.g. Kale, 1988; McDonald, 1988; Orr, 1977, 1982; Osborne, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1988; Osborne & Bamford, 1987; Osborne & Coombs, 1982, 1987, 1988; Osborne & Francis, 1987; Osborne & Henderson, 1985; Osborne & Sellars, 1987; Shnukal, 1984a; 1984b).

Research into education in the Torres Strait became largely a reaction to the view that schooling, as experienced by Islanders prior to commencement of educational reform, was a colonial institution that was mono-cultural, assimilatory and incongruent to Islander culture, ways of knowing and values. Curriculum, likewise mono-cultural, was seen as irrelevant and as inhibiting the conceptual development of Islander children. Pedagogical practices were recognised as culturally inappropriate and incongruent with Islander learning styles and cultural ways. The use of English as the language of instruction was questioned not only as being assimilatory but also as unmindful of the linguistic background of Islander students and of the role that language played in the cognitive and intellectual development of children.

Over the past twenty-five years, research on education in the Torres Strait concentrated in three main areas: history, language and culture. Much of the research can be read as interesting, useful and adding to knowledge about Islanders. But, as in times past, the theoretical premises and assumptions are founded in the disciplines and parallel disciplinary developments. And despite improvements little headway has been made in terms of relative disadvantage as measured in education outcomes.

History

In the accounts of earlier educational history (see Finch, 1975; Langbridge, 1977), Islander experiences were represented through a simple description

of formal schooling practices — that is, the forms of education that missionaries and government instituted and the effects of these on the educational outcomes of Islanders. Other accounts can be found in the work done by Orr and Williamson (1973) and Boxall and Duncan (1979).

Orr and Williamson (1973) captured the harsh reality of educating Torres Strait Islander children in broken-down buildings, with an almost unmodified state curriculum, with white teachers who had little understanding of Islander values or languages, and with Islander teachers who had inadequate levels of English and teacher education. In a following paper, Williamson (1974) highlighted the 'incongruence' for the Islander child as a learner in a school system based on 'white middle-class Australia' and its values. He argued that policy and reform makers needed to pursue 'different' educational goals, and that the difficulties experienced by the Islander children in current schooling situations would not be overcome unless there was 'intensive research into the distinctive learning needs and motivations of these children' (1974, p. 60).

Boxall and Duncan's (1979) survey of the school system was more extensive, and included recommendations similar to ones put forward by Finch (1977). These included a case for further research into bilingual education, Islander learning styles and the developmental patterns of Islander children to enable the development of programs that would reflect the children's local experience while at the same time opening up the world beyond the islands. They also encouraged community involvement and direction in programs to encourage and promote cultural identity. Both these surveys also flagged an urgent need to upgrade the training of Islander teachers. In the main these were early descriptions of a 'broken-down' school system and more attuned to progress resources and resourcing issues for the schools.

More recently, educational historians like Williamson (1997) grappled with how to represent the complexity and the dynamics that shaped Islander historical experience between 'the colonizer and the colonized' (p. 407), and signalled a much needed shift in research of Torres Strait Islander education experiences. Here was an opportunity to consider the Islander standpoint and provide some insights into how Islanders viewed the role of education or the experience of schooling in relation to their position within the changing order of things. To do so might reveal, disrupt or disturb the ways that Islanders were generally inscribed as subjects of others' understanding. If this could emerge, then the contradictions and ambiguities that emerge in the contemporary

concerns that Islanders have about their educational position may come to be seen within its own historical formation, within their historical experience of it. Further, the ambiguities, contradictions and risks of Western education become a continuous theme in what Islanders need to manage and shape and so inform what Islanders prioritise as goals of education in changing times. These contradictions and risks can never be completely resolved; they require ongoing consideration as the ever-changing context of life in the Torres Strait shifts and alters according to external agendas and interests.

Williamson's history of colonial Torres Strait schooling provides a useful site for investigating contemporary disciplinary practice in relation to understanding Islanders at the interface of changing times. What Islanders like myself get excited by when Williamson and other writers of our history and educational priorities talk of moving beyond the limitations of their conventions and their past writings, is that they will come closer to understanding that Islander calls for education, for 'proper' schooling, for 'university education' were not simply misguided aspirations to become 'white'. An Islander such as me would hope to find evidence of Islanders reading their own diminished position, seeing their secondary relation and understanding the need to 'know' the ways of this intruding world that refused us a position on a level with others. For example, Islanders who worked on government boats had no means to check government assessments and balance sheets.

> We had no education to check the scales, we knew no arithmetic, subtraction, addition. If we brought up 5 or 7 tons [of pearl shells] and the price was say £155 per ton, we might get, ah £5 or £6?...just pocket money. (Ganter, 1994, p. 72)

Our calls were never simply about schooling in English or just about becoming literate in that language for its own sake. Rather, they were about working out what the language of 'white' people and their institutions do that keeps us at a disadvantage, that keeps us as the lesser 'knowers' in situations.

> We been work for JW Bleakley. He come out [to] all the islands, he said, 'Oh, I'm your big mamus, here are two sticks of tobacco, here are two blankets'...so we bend the knee and bow down to him...I get one stick tobacco; that's my pay for Chief Councillor. Well we used to go down to the office and you know those little Pass Books? They stop me if I want to draw money today...'You have to wait for next week'. (Islander cited in Sharp, 1993, p. 127)

>…they kept the books, you had no proof. (Islander cited in Ganter, 1994, p. 87)

>But still the government weighed the shell. It looks like they cheated. They didn't let you know how much it weighed. (Islander cited in Ganter, 1994, p. 90)

>You see my mind opened to the world the first time I heard about university when a signalman during the War said he's going back to uni. It's a new language the blokes spoke during the War. They'd often come to me and talk about things…So I thought to myself…I'll be able to learn more by serving next door to a white bloke and be able to ask him things. Because I want to know like a white man…Then I wanted to join the fortress signals, to learn about the radio and talk to someone to improve my English. I think it's just that I always wanted to find out more about things and inquire about them. At the end of the War I wanted to become a leader of Torres Strait. (Islander cited in Sharp, 1993, p. 167)

As we moved through the latter half of the twentieth century, the ongoing calls for schooling in English continued to be about an understanding of what it is in the language of the emerging community around us that continues to provide conditions to all of our possibilities. What people do not seem to understand is that these calls emerged out of particular moments in the Islanders' historical trajectory when certain things impacted on our lives that made it imperative that we take action.

The Islander calls for 'proper' schooling in English emerge at times when we are most concerned about our futures. But as well it is crucially about defending ourselves against the constant intrusions into our lives, and about maintaining our stature in the face of others. We are not content with being subjected as 'Other' to everybody else. We reference ourselves to an entire universe not just to Western imperialist projects. At an international language and education conference in Greece in 2001, I put it to Donaldo Macedo, a colleague of Paulo Freire, that just because we have not yet exacted a science on how to teach English to Indigenous people without threatening the place of Indigenous languages and cultures it should not equate to a free and open attack on calls for English as being 'ideologically unsound'. We simply refuse to be treated as 'overgrown children', and as if the 'adult' always knows better. As Audre Lorde (1984) suggested, 'it is not [our] difference that immobilises us, it is silence [emphasis added]. And there are many

silences to be broken' (p. 44). This, for me, added to the need to critically review liberal sentiments and projects that underpinned the past thirty years of educational reform. We could do well with reassessing how these have come to hold the higher position in determining 'what is good for us' and, in turn, how they have come to silence our views on the way we might prioritise reform in our communities. Even when 'outside experts' acknowledge that perhaps Islanders have a reading of how it is they have come to be positioned by the outside world over the past century and have developed the means to negotiate their way, they feel a need to redirect, to correct and to reposition this reading as incomplete understanding. It may be more useful to Islanders, if listening required suspension of the tendency to call us in to other systems of thought and logic.

This is why I read Williamson's (1997) approach to the document-ation of educational histories with much hope. I saw that it may open up spaces for the Islanders' call to be included as a crucial reference point for recounting the history of formal schooling in the Torres Strait, and I looked forward especially to the kinds of methodological innovations he promised beyond 'imperial' (p. 407) reference points. Central to Williamson's approach in his article, 'Decolonizing Historiography of Colonial Education', is the realisation that 'the colonial context of education appears to have been more dynamic than is commonly acknowledged and more powerful in shaping schooling's practices and outcomes than conventional accounts would have us believe' (p. 408), and thus his thesis that 'educational policies...might not have been as coercive and exclusionist as at first appeared' (pp. 413–14).

From his review of early accounts of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling under colonial rule, Williamson (1997) found that writers were mostly caught up with 'imperial concerns' (p. 407) and 'ignored important elements in the interrelationship between colonizer and colonized' (p. 407). As he went on to suggest, 'what has emerged, until recently, has been an "official view of history"' (p. 407). By contrast, and from his review of later accounts, he noted important progress being made by the shift away from 'imperial' or 'official' viewpoints. Since the 1970s, as he pointed out, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous historians were beginning to show Australian Indigenous people as having a history 'in terms of family and community concerns...attachment to their land, and the roles of family, kin, and community in validating, and passing on their histories' (Working Party cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 408). As well, they were being shown as having a history of confronting, resisting and adapting creatively to colonial encounters, and indeed 'less as the

"fatal impact" found in European post-colonial critiques and more as "subtle and complex levels of mutual exploitation and accommodation'" (Howe cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 409).

Williamson goes on to position himself with Carter to argue that in the attempt to move out of histories being written from the 'vantage point of the west' (1997, p. 407) the 'revisionists' were still caught up in writing histories using colonial referents and criteria. I think the methodological point is a very good one in that the recent shift in recounting Australian Indigenous experiences by the revisionists produced 'a narrative of non-contact rather than contact because the material from the Aboriginal side of the frontier is interpreted by the same criteria used to establish and interpret that from the white side, whose reference is the external world' (Williamson, 1997, p. 409).

To move beyond extant positions and their modes of representation, Williamson aligned himself with Mullins (1995) to chart the comple-xities in encounters between Islanders and the colonialists, as well as with Carter (1992) to seek 'referents internal to each side and to the contact situation itself' (Williamson, 1997, p. 409) and thus a frame-work for interpreting and representing, in research terms, 'what is going on'. Following Carter's line, he saw colonial encounters as having 'spatial and temporal characteristics charged with symbolic meaning as newcomers and original inhabitants, total strangers, attempt to dissolve the physical and psychological distance between one another, and open lines of communication in the search for coexistence' (1997, p. 409). I am confident that these will be crucial elements in any future methodological position taken to representing Indigenous histories as we move further into the twenty-first century. I am also in agreement that such a position has the potential to bring out important 'dynamics of the educational contexts'. It will be enlightening for us all, especially in the field of Torres Strait Islander education, if intervention in formal schooling processes, for instance, becomes based on such dynamics and not solely on histories told through some Western canon.

Getting to the 'dynamics', however, is more easily said than done for this type of methodological innovation has even evaded founding intellectuals. This has resulted in disciplines narrowing to only accep-ting elements that are continuous with their own — a take-up that reflects more a taking of sides rather than a push forward to rediscover elements of complex intersections that people negotiate in the everyday. To explore elements of continuities and discontinuities with Western systems of thought, people who see a need for improved theoretical configurations need to understand first that the Islander people are not

just the all-encompassed colonised people in the far north of Australia. We can never simply be a people just of the past or singularly the 'victim' of external influences; we are a people with an active past of adapting our traditions to better place ourselves and our heritage in changing times.

Williamson, in trying to get to a better understanding of colonial encounters, buys into grounded theory and symbolic interactionist sociology (Mead, 1964). This particular interpretative framework seeks to get to the bottom of 'what is going on' (Denzin, 1992; Woods, 1986) at various points of intersecting historical trajectories by prioritising local viewpoints to explain, if you like, 'what is happening here' (McDermott, 1982). It tries to stand apart from anthropological approaches to 'native cultures' as exotic traditions of a people, to avoid the notion that there are cultural 'truths' out there waiting to be recorded.

The alternate framework tries to concentrate on engagements between smaller groups of people (or sub-cultures), with a particular view to re-presenting the interactive processes from the viewpoint of those who engage in them. This framework tries to provide for a position that gives primacy to how people make sense of the world they live in — as they do — as well as a focus on smaller groups of people whose symbolic sense-making processes are often obscured by, or not visible to, the dominant group. Osborne and Dawes (1992), for example, studied classroom encounters between an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and her Torres Strait Islander students (from videotape recordings and from subsequent interviews with students and the teacher) by 'immersing' themselves into the discourse of classroom processes to get a better understanding of the 'ways the teachers and the class (or parts of it at various times) worked with each other to sustain an activity' (p. 3). It was an important attempt by them to move away from canonical readings of the state versus its subjects, to step away from always seeing Islanders as objects of educational practice, and to shift more toward understanding how such encounters are conditioned by all who participate in them. Williamson makes the simple point that if we look at Islander education from the 'local level' we see that the colonisers may not have been as much in control as they thought they were. The corollary of this is to shift the Islander from the position of being always already 'victims' and this alone is a significant methodological step.

However, I am uneasy about the ways that Williamson has undertaken the task to bring into focus 'the dynamics of the educational context', 'processes of interaction' and 'the active engagement of Islanders in negotiating culture contact' (1997, p. 407). What is offered as his

interpretative framework is a position that is said to be 'eclectic', even 'loose' (p. 412). As he says, this framework is based on a theory that emerged '[a]s data were gathered and analysed…[and later] adjusted to the judgement and creativity of the researcher' (p. 412). He goes on to say that this framework is about producing a history 'grounded in written reports and the voices and observations of protagonists and eye-witnesses' (p. 413). And I agree — there is value in innovating the age-old practice of only using external referents and by moving towards theories grounded in data but how does a researcher leave history — their cultural and intellectual baggage — at the door before entering the Islander classroom?

This is where it begins to get interesting. In Williamson's attempt to legitimate a theoretical position for recounting historical events, past writings and people's recollections, we read a whole lot about the new conventional orthodoxy in his approach to theory and little about the primary referents of his interpretative framework. Without this, we are left wondering what his theoretical position on data is — his elected methodological position. Does he see, for example, data gathered from Islanders and other people or from the archives as emerging out of a particular history? What is that history? Is it one where everything is continuous to Western systems of thought or one that is continuous with Islander systems of thought? Or is it a history of the contesting positions where one loses and others win? Or is it one of strategically moving between them, borrowing from and adapting to ensure the continuance of one alongside the other? In short, what provided the context for the data to have meaning? I am not reassured by the statement, '[a]s data were gathered and analysed, theory emerged as concepts or relationships acting as "centres for the crystallization of later ideas"' (Phillips cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 412). How, for instance, will he see recollections by individual Islanders? Do we focus on data from the archive and the individual as belonging to a history that tells of an uninterrupted chain of events, or do we try to focus on the systems of thought in the messages that they convey (i.e., the context in which things are said and that which provides its meanings)? And do we seek, in either of these positions, continuities or links with other factors/events/readings to re-present to readers what was stated or written, or do we seek discontinuities, ruptures, thresholds and constraints to allow readers to see what conditions the possibilities in what is stated or written.

I do not want to imply here that 'grounded' theory is questionable but do note the lack of clarity in the approach to it — a question of a situation that poses as a problem for all researchers but not often resolved

by them. Williamson himself suggests at the beginning of his discussion that, 'the researcher needs to make explicit the theoretical views guiding the study, decide the data that are most appropriate to gather, and the ways these data may best be analyzed' (1997, p. 412).

Nor do I want to impose questions upon Williamson from so-called 'post-structuralist' or 'post-colonial' positions. Rather, mine is a valid methodological question about the new referents and criteria in his interpretative framework for re-presenting data, for instance, from the Islanders; or is it really the case that they can be found in the data? If so, how will one identify such elements after electing to abandon their intellectual baggage at the gate before entering the field of inquiry — is it really possible for one to step outside of history?

We are left then to scrutinise his approach from his use of data gathered in the field. What follows in his key themes is a recount of schooling events in the Torres Strait that to me, as an Islander, seems to stand in defence of the state (despite its legislative power to officiate over its many institutions, employees and constituents). Williamson, for instance, argues that although there are those who perceive that early colonial governmental regimes were about 'dampen[ing] down Islanders' aspirations for equality of status' (1997, p. 414), they 'might not have been as coercive and exclusionist as at first appeared' (pp. 413–14).

However, he acknowledges that 'the government spent less on Islanders' education than on education for whites' (p. 13) but, as he tries to convey, the state was, at least, 'forced to do more for Islanders in the Torres Strait than for Aboriginal people on the mainland' (p. 414). I guess then that we, as Islanders, need to be at least half grateful rather than ungrateful. Nevertheless, as he goes on to show, schooling on the islands was delivered under many constraints. For example, schooling was to be delivered in a very remote part of the state, under a policy of Protection and Segregation, by 'teachers of indifferent quality' (p. 413), and with little prospect for schooling leading to employment. Schooling also progressed under pressure from many quarters, including the different priorities of regional administrators, the churches and the Islanders themselves who were demanding a 'better deal' (p. 414). Moreover, at any one time in the islands, as he goes on to explain, there 'were never more than two resident white missionaries during LMS [London Missionary Society] times...while in 1932, at the peak of government schooling, only eight of the 41 teachers in the schools were white' (p. 414). In short, schooling 'was placed largely in the hands of [a few] white teachers of indifferent quality and Islander teachers lacking in higher schooling and teacher training' (p. 413). There were, however,

some teachers (Firth and Turner, cited in Williamson, 1997, pp. 416–17) who were able to take Islander students beyond the standard (Third Class) set by the State of Queensland. This, he says, was achieved because of the isolation of Islander communities and, amongst other things, the lack of supervision by the officials. Thus, curriculum activity over the years was adapted to suit the 'locale of reserve life' (p. 420).

The schooling that ensued from such a situation did, as Williamson puts it, 'provide insights into white custom' (p. 418) and did not deter Islander parents or grandparents from teaching 'their own language and culture' (p. 420). And, in these ways, schooling did not lead to a segmentation of the community along the lines of educational achievements because, as he surmises, '[b]eing white was the essential prerequisite' (p. 418). For Williamson, '[t]he deciding issues were the strength of custom, the quality of teachers, their relationships with them [Islanders], and the opportunities schooling offered them' (p. 420). This was, as he argues, 'no mere function of colonialism. Rather, it was 'a dynamic process in which its practices and outcomes were shaped less by policy statements and the institutional infrastructure of mission and government than by what took place at the local level' (cited in Nakata, 1997, p. 429).

My concern is raised when Williamson moves to conclude that the Islanders' call for 'proper schooling [was a] misplaced' hope (cited in Nakata, 1997, p. 429). He acknowledges that school learning 'was not always functional to the political, economic and social contexts of life in the islands' (Williamson, 1997, p. 419) and contends this was mainly due to the aforementioned constraints and pressures, 'segregation, limited employment opportunities, and racism' (Williamson, 1997, p. 420). Besides, he adds, proper schooling on the mainland at the time 'had little to offer working class Australians, let alone Aboriginal people and Islanders' (cited in Nakata, 1997, p. 429). What does not figure as a priority in this equation is a view to the Islander perspective that the 'hope' for formal schooling was, and continues to be, a political call to be rid of an intrusive form of governmentality set on entrenching Islander dependence on welfare.

As far as Williamson is concerned, Islanders' desire for education 'grew out of their perceptions of its power to bring benefits to them in the new order' (Williamson, 1997, p. 414). The 'benefits', according to Williamson, were mostly to do with gaining a 'share in the benefits of other introduced institutions such as the commercial fisheries, wage labour and the church. They wanted a share of the power of Europeans and their material goods' (pp. 414–15). Schooling, in this sense, is seen

to be prioritised by Islanders. Indeed Williamson claims, it is 'perceived as a "route to the cargo"...[as having] the potential for gaining "equality of power" with Europeans...[and] tapped the power of Christianity' (cited in Nakata, 1997, p. 429). This is perplexing. Was it not the intention to leave external referents at the door before going into the classroom?

This view, however, does not come altogether as a surprise to me. The call for formal schooling has been treated in such ways over and over again in the literature. Outside experts just do not seem to get it. It is not a simple case of wanting an education in 'white ways' to gain material benefits from 'the new order' — a 'route to the cargo'. Neither can it be simply about gaining power and equality with others. Nor is it to find the right path to Heaven. While the anthropological construct of a ship bringing back Indigenous ancestors (as white people) and a cargo of material goods from another world as a spiritual phenomena viz., 'cargo cult' (Worsley, 1968) may be a manipulation of the experiences of people in Papua New Guinea and Melanesia in general, or of the Tanna people of New Hebrides and their encounters with American GI soldiers in particular, it is certainly not a practice I am familiar with in the Torres Strait. But it is an identifiable process in a long history of peculiar practices: in the ways literature on cannibalism in other parts of the world was assembled to appoint Islanders in history as cannibals; in the ways that scientific disciplines from other parts of the world designated us as savages even before they arrived in the islands; and in the ways a 'commonsense' from other parts of the world prevailed in government regimes to see us only as overgrown children even after decades of living alongside fiercely independent Islander leaders in their communities. These are the kinds of elements of what prominent Aboriginal intellectual Marcia Langton (1996) refers to as a deep psychosis in Western systems of thought, which continues to harbour the logic for colonial settlers to legitimise their presence and occupation of lands and seaways that do not belong to them.

Islanders have called for an education not simply so we gain benefits from it. It is so that we can gauge and understand the external influences in our lives, what it is we are up against, and what it means for our survival in colonial environments. I don't think we can simply discount the political vision in this as 'misplaced' hopes. This is indeed a dimension where we, as Islanders, are aligned politically. It is about how to appropriate a better position for ourselves — to cut better deals for ourselves and our traditional heritage in changing times. This is a reference point that must be given primacy in any recount of the Islander schooling. If it was, we would begin to comprehend a very different

picture when Islanders say 'schooling had failed them…"No way to go — no way to go…we want education from school, but we got nothing"' (cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 415), or when Williamson reports that though 'their curiosity to know more might have been dulled by their school experiences it was never extinguished' (p. 415). Likewise, it makes a different sense to me when I read in Williamson's data that, 'Islanders appear to have connected schooling in English with their material and political advancement and were not put off by its failure to bring results immediately' (p. 415).

Furthermore, I certainly hear something different when I read his account of Islanders who 'acquired insights into their social and racial inferiority in the Islands and displayed attitudes which some whites thought were above their station…[and about reports in 1905] that school leavers had been rendered '"cheeky, conceited, and indolent"' by their schooling (cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 419). It's frustrating when Islander statements like this are taken simply as displays of negative behaviour: '[w]hether this outcome contributed to subsequent labour unrest among Islanders can only be speculated upon' (p. 419). Why are we so caught up with what others thought, reported or speculated? Is it really that hard to understand what is said by Islanders? If, for a moment, we consider Islander statements as political acts strategic to the ways they negotiate intersecting historical trajectories then we may begin to hear what Islanders are trying to express. Maybe it was because Islanders had learned something in schools and had come to some understanding of their position vis-a-vis 'whites'. And maybe it was because they were able to articulate to those in charge, with confidence and in a language they could understand, what they thought of that. Or maybe it was simply because of a realisation that 'whites' were not as smart as first perceived.

If we do provide primacy in the interpretations of Islanders as 'negotiators', 'actors', or informed players in their own historical trajectories, and try to understand that what is said by them emerges out of a political position, we would get a very different reading when an Islander is reported to have said something. What do we get, for instance, if we consider what Islanders mean when they say that after gaining insights into 'white ways' from their schooling they believed 'there was even greater power in their island custom' (Williamson, 1997, p. 419). If an Islander is reported to have said that he 'plussed' 'three quarters of his island custom with one-quarter of "knowledge from the outside world" in his "new life" under white rule' (Sharp cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 419), it is not a novel phenomenon to be posed in a paradoxical situation, nor can it be regarded simply as an implication 'that underscored schooling's

diverse and complex character in the islands' (p. 419). It could be read simply as this Islander's realisation of the shortfalls of 'white' knowledge, his reinstatement of Islander knowledge as credible and valid, his recognition of the political advantages to knowing about the outside world, and importantly, his reiteration of the political project to maintain Islander positions, despite those revolutionaries who perceive all conditions to be hegemonic 'under white rule' (p. 420).

We get the important message from Williamson's recount that the history of schooling has been a dynamic interplay of many elements, and more complex than previously acknowledged. The primary perspective used by Williamson about the history of schooling in the islands requires that we take particular consideration of the constraints in the local contexts in order to see a history of colonial governments and their policy as involved, but not altogether responsible for generations of extremely poor educational outcomes. I also see the need for the inclusion of government teachers, Islander teachers, Islander people and the broader aspects of community relations (e.g. segregation, racism, under-resourcing) as part of the explanation as to what delimited the schooling processes, and thus by association, see them also responsible in part for the poor educational outcomes. But when there are no priorities given to the Islanders' perspective in the 'negotiated situations' (p. 421), when Islander contributions do not find a place in this new approach to the documentation of histories that speaks in relation to the political position which Islanders find themselves in, and when I see statements by Islanders used to bolster what appears to be Williamson's defence of the early colonial projects, I see no advance from earlier writings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories in Australia.

Yes, it does need to be written that we are all part of the formalities of schooling. But those involved must be considered as having an active past of moving in and out of socially contested terrains, consciously making and remaking themselves as a unique group of Australian Indigenous people — a political disposition that provides the foundations to what Islanders say and an epistemological locatedness that informs what is possible by them. Otherwise, data can be misconstrued and recounts can end up being read as an apology for the state. When Islander positions are simply incorporated as part of the array of factors involved in schooling, and implicated in its processes, it signals to me that primacy has been given in the interpretative framework to represent neither the historical nor the epistemological locatedness of the Islanders in the so-called 'negotiations'. And to borrow from Williamson's own text, to not go beyond this point demonstrates that this approach to Islander histories

'does less than it intends and achieves more of what the context in which it is set allows' (1997, p. 421).

Language

Much of the general literature on Torres Strait Islander education in Australia begins from an assumption that oral traditions and the first language of the student are fundamental elements that can have a profound effect on educational achievement. Advocates of bilingual education, for example, argue for the beginning years of formal schooling to be undertaken in the student's first language. For an effective transition into the literate traditions of English-based classrooms, they argue, a student from an oral culture needs to be literate in their own language first. English as a Second Language (ESL) advocates argue for, in situations where English is the primary medium for teaching and learning, recognition of the student's first language and treatment of English as their second language. Traditionalists, on the other hand, argue for teaching and learning to be entirely in the student's first language and for English to be learned as a foreign language.

All assume a beginning position with students who come from an oral tradition. Interestingly, the 'oral tradition' factor sits in their equation almost without question. Little is made of the fact that locating students within an 'oral tradition' narrows down their presence in history to 'something' that is 'not' part of the literate traditions, and as separate and apart from the complex world of negotiating colliding historical trajectories over the past two hundred years. It is so simple a proposition that it is stunning. I turn here to a linguistic model devised for learning mathematics to chart this thinking further.

As part of an attempt to explain mathematics education as it relates to people from an oral tradition, Watson's (1988) continua consider an analysis via a theoretical framework built on socio-demographic and linguistic differences between orate and literate traditions. But how easy is it to identify where Islanders are on an oral/literate continuum (cf. Goody, 1978)?

Helen Watson's approach not only helps to exemplify the key components of the language-specific approaches to improving educational outcomes of Aboriginal people but also accepts that 'there exists the same type of continuum linking use of Torres Strait Islander languages and English' (1988, p. 257). If anything, it is a very good example of the assumptions made in language areas of formal education as they attempt a level of complexity to represent Islander lifeworlds in new times in Australia. My concern here is not with the application of this

model to maths education or Aboriginal people. Rather, it is to draw to the light underlying positions about the languages used by Torres Strait Islanders and gauge how well the theoretical model devised by Watson deals with 'oral traditions'. This is a fundamental issue that sits at the heart of proponents advocating priorities for education to be in the first language.

To investigate the appropriateness of the application of such continua to Torres Strait Islanders, I attempt here to chart Watson's theoretical construction of the model through its various stages. To gain an insight into the suggested relatedness to Torres Strait Islander linguistics, Anna Shnukal's extensive research work in the Torres Strait on the Torres Strait Creole in *Broken: An introduction to the creole language of Torres Strait* (1988), will be employed to plot Islanders along the continua using Watson's criteria. From the outset, it is interesting to note that Torres Strait communities are located at one end of Watson's continua as a separate group but fail to appear as a group anywhere else. This reflects the tendency to treat Aboriginal people and Islanders as one and the same, and to assume that traditional Islander communities are subjected to the same influences as traditional Aboriginal communities. In many research studies, policies and legislations in Australia Islanders are, to borrow a phrase from feminist theory, 'commatised' (O'Brien, 1984).

Watson (1988) primarily 'examines mathematics education as it relates to the Aboriginal-Australian community' (p. 255). In this analysis, she takes the view that mathematics is a 'linguistic enterprise' (p. 259). To distance herself from past assimilationist policies on schooling, Watson aligns herself with an educational curriculum and pedagogy that addresses the bicultural experience of Australia's Indigenous people. With this perspective, she claims, '(b)icultural education will reproduce the economy and culture of Aboriginal Australia through dynamic interaction with European Australia' (1988, p. 255).

To describe how far removed the student is from the maths register of the English language, Watson constructs a linear model to map sub-groups according to their linguistic characteristics. This model employs two continua. The first continuum on the horizontal plane relates to the 'ordinary everyday' language spoken amongst a group. The second continuum on the vertical plane concerns the degree to which oral or literate communication predominates in community groups.

The first continuum involves differences in semantic structures of the ordinary everyday language spoken in Indigenous communities, with the English and traditional languages at opposite ends of the continuum. Watson argues that the systematic ordering of reality which occurs with

traditional languages has profound differences in semantic or meaning structures to those of the English language and its dialects, hence their location along the continuum at opposite ends. Different language groups categorise their world distinctly. On this basis, Watson is able to locate the different language dialect use along the continuum. Consequently, traditional communities are located at one end of the continuum with a trend towards communities dispersed in metropolitan and urban areas at the other. There they live as members of the European-derived Australian community and speak dialects of English.

The second continuum attempts to locate the extent to which oral and literate modes of communication predominate in each community. Watson maps groups from traditional communities where print does not figure in their modes of communication on one end of the continuum, moving towards metro-urban Aboriginals whose modes of communication are heavily involved with the use of the printed material.

Here Heath's (1983) major ethnography of literacy among Southern US African-Americans is significant, particularly in its systematic demonstration that stereotypes of 'oral culture' among 'non-mainstream' groups can be erroneous and ethnocentric.

For instance, according to Finch (1975), formal education was first established in the Torres Strait by LMS missionaries in 1891. A teacher training institute was also established soon after by the missionaries on Murray Island and later a theological college at St Paul's Mission on Moa Island. Indeed, the Torres Strait region can claim over a century of exposure to missionaries of most all denominations, Government protectors and administrators, a cash economy, and the presence of literature as part of the daily life. With the arrival of new communication technology to the region, and at the time Watson was developing this continua, there was a regular television program to the islands, a local radio program and telephone connection to all the islands. All entailed, directly and indirectly, the use of various texts or at the least exposure to them. The availability of video on all islands also provided similar access to (video displayed) print and 'the world of the literate'. Regular transport within the region also improved the distribution of newsagent texts. But not all Islanders chose to partake in the literate traditions. At the same time a seventy-year-old member of the regional education committee is able to read and write fluently in English, a fifteen-year-old leaves school in the 1990s with only the basic competencies in English literacy. These observations and influences hint at the wide variance possible in the effects and presence of literate texts to the region.

With this in mind, consider that Watson's continuum primarily acknowledges that the further removed geographically a group is from Western society then the less the degree to which they become involved with print, and consequently the less such textual 'ways with words' influence their speech registers. Hence her continuum appears to deal with the interaction of the written forms only in general terms of 'contact' and does not in any way address the qualitative aspects of interaction with the text.

Even adding into Watson's continuum the variety of language use in each of her settings serves only to illustrate what we already know: that because Torres Strait Islander communities have only been involved with print texts since the latter part of the nineteenth century and because groups vary in their degree of involvement with 'mainstream' society, English speakers, their disciplines and their institutions, they also vary in the degree to which they are able to make sense of the more 'specialised' registers of English.

Watson's continua, while an ambitious preliminary attempt to identify 'differences' among Indigenous groups to the English language, and therefore starting points to engage in formal learning processes, stops short of placing constituent communities appropriately. For example: the limited investigation of the influence of the printed material on speech registers in each community; the lack of consideration given to the influence of the second language; the low priority given to migratory movements between constituent communities; the inconsistencies of groupings from continua to locating communities on the grid (e.g. the merging of rural non-traditional, metro-urban and rural-urban comm-unities); and the statement that inclusion of Islander people would group along a similar continua, all point to the need for a better understanding of the sociology of language of both Islander and Aboriginal groups.

Categorising these groups to position discussions on appropriate curriculum and pedagogy would best be treated with caution. Placing groups along an oral/literate continua is to generalise, perhaps inaccur-ately, about certain groups of people. Amongst educators and curric-ulum developers, such categorisation can lead to standardisation, which when reflected in pedagogy and curriculum, leaves teachers no closer to addressing the complexities of individual linguistic and social backgrounds.

In reference to Torres Strait Islander students, consideration of only the predominate language used in the community is insufficient. The assumption with language specific approaches — whether they be bilingual, ESL or traditional language focused — is that all students

have a common language and, as shown here, it is no longer tenable to assume they have the same linguistic background or resources. The first, second and oftentimes third language spoken, also become significant factors in understanding the characteristics of Islanders, and make any categorisation of Torres Strait Islanders more complex and problematic. It is therefore necessary to pay closer attention to the individual capabilities of each student before assuming linguistic relationships to the English language.

But where to start, and how practical is it for teachers of classrooms with such diversity of linguistic backgrounds? Which language does the teacher start with — the common language or the student's first language? Which first language? Who decides? What linguistic resources do 'white' teachers have to deal with this? This is the cause of so much ambivalence in classrooms today, leaving teachers bewildered with basic pedagogical questions like: how to conference Kriol texts produced by students and in which language; how to connect representational resources in these texts to link students to core curriculum areas; what constitutes a linguistic resource, grammar, knowledge and skills. Herein lies the very reason why student writing experiences in primary schools are limited to recounts from one year level to the next (Nakata, Jensen, Nakata, 1995). It is one thing to recognise important representational resources of the learners but it is a very strategic pedagogical task to capture them as 'hooks' to engage learners in other learning activities — an area where we, as educators, are still to learn a great deal more.

However, it is the effect that worries me greatly. The readiness with which the Islanders' unproblematised 'oral tradition' comes to constitute a fundamental component to a linear model is troublesome. Constituting Islander language communities at one end of the spectrum and English language communities at the other effectively sets up the way to understand educational matters as well as the direction of the reform process. Thinking about educational matters then must begin at one point and progress must be staged: there needs to be mastery of one stage before the other; failure at any stage breaks the chain and therefore the link to the next. This is evident in the argument of language advocates that literacy in one language provides the 'readiness' for literate competencies in another.

The ready acceptance of a linear model also sutures over the fact that English language communities come from and still are part of an oral tradition. The oral and literate world are not separate but entwined, inter-textual and continue to evolve as traditions and artefacts of our engagements with each other; we all continue to live in times where there are oral traditions. Just as Saussure failed to give primacy to the dialectics

of the material world in the identification of a language group, bilingual advocates fail to explore in more detail the value of complexities in the lifeworld of Islanders in their everyday communications.

Like Williamson, approaches to the language issues in 'new times' promise much more than it delivered. And to leave basic points unresolved in theoretical frameworks, in turn, can serve directly to frustrate progress of the educational issues in professional practice.

Culture

Just as the early literature inscribed Islanders as 'lost souls', 'savages' and 'child-like', the educational literature of the 1980s and 1990s continued the same mode of abstracting to another disciplinary plane the material realities and conditions of the Islander as exotic experiences, habits, languages, economies and cultures — a preoccupation with universal cultural categories where images of the Islander people remain undifferentiated, and unproblematised as 'Western talk'. As Raymond Williams (1977) and Roland Barthes (1972) noted of bourgeois practice, transformations of realities into images of the world are not only an intellectual production but also an ideological one.

The following reading of 'culture' is to explicate the politics of 'taken-for-granted' positions, to again disrupt the 'givens' and to highlight what has become habitual in practice and 'natural' in its historical transformation. The cultural Islander represented in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) is a particularly good example for this. It exemplifies well the third area of concentration by non-Islanders with cultural difference and contemporary discourse in the formal education process.

In the National Policy Statement the Islander appears as one of Australia's Indigenous people with distinctive cultural attributes: 'Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Their distinctive cultures are a rich and important part of the nation's living heritage' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, p. 5). Likewise, education is redefined as a cultural event:

> The historically-developed education processes of…[Islander] culture have been eroded in many communities for a variety of reasons. The education arrangements and procedures established from… [Western] traditions have not adequately recognised and accom-modated the particular needs and circumstances of…[Islander] people. (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, p. 5)

Societal relations are similarly implicated with 'culture': 'Not only have...[Islander] people been consequently disadvantaged, but Australian society has not come to understand and appreciate the significance of...[Islander] culture' (1989, p. 5).

In the process of developing this national policy statement, those who were consulted also agreed to an education policy to be developed 'in harmony with employment development policies...[to] enable...[Islander] people to pursue their own goals in community development, cultural maintenance, self-management and economic independence' (1989, p. 8). Furthermore, it is claimed that the national policy statement 'represents a co-operative effort to develop more effective processes for the education of...[Islander] people' (p. 5). This becomes hard for anyone to ignore. And when it is said to be 'predicated upon the principles of social justice, equity, economic efficiency and cost-effective service delivery' (p. 6) and with a 'major purpose...to achieve broad equity between...[Islander] people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education' (p. 9), the national policy appears as a logical, coherent, all-encompassing educational policy.

As a sign from within the domain of anthropology, 'culture', if we consult a basic undergraduate text book by Harris (1985), 'refers to the socially acquired traditions. When anthropologists speak of a human culture, they usually mean the total socially acquired lifestyle of a group of people' (p. 114). These include ways for 'speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting' (p. 114) which also serve as norms or standards to 'society's culture of domestic [and public] life' (p. 114). To refer to the Islander as a cultural subject, the national policy statement of 1989 borrows an anthropological schema of how the Torres Strait Islander is seen as an organised group, regardless of what the Islander perceives of herself/ himself. Culture, in these ways, sets up from the outset priorities to represent the collective habits of a people. As the collective experience of a group of people, 'culture' in policy is a referent to inter-group relations with little emphasis on intra-group diversity. In other words, individual members, their age, their gender, their religion, their schooling needs, their interests, their economic needs, their politics, their individual persuasions and their own experiences remain undifferentiated, and suffice under the common group norm as the 'cultural other'.

Next, when the national policy statement argues that 'historically-developed education processes of...[Islander] culture have been eroded' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, p. 5), the dynamic nature of the cultural phenomenon takes on a new role. As a socially constructed and historically situated entity, culture is in

process of change and adaptation. 'Erosion', however, is a metaphor that begins from the perception of culture as a foundational and potentially static entity (Luke, Nakata, Singh and Smith, 1993). This covers over the notion of culture as constantly changing. What then emerges is a viewpoint of 'culture' as museum pieces for the anthropological gaze, as unitary static objects, which renders the Islanders' historical presence in some distant anthropological schema of a different tradition.

The acceptance of a universal term in these ways stands to omit the array of factors that contribute to 'the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia' (p. 7). For instance, the diagnosis of the Islanders' situation as 'eroding' leads policy one way to prioritise an educational agenda reliant on adding in, restoring and preserving strategies to reinstate the 'nation's living heritage' and relegates to the margins extant teaching and learning practices that have failed students for decades.

Yes, the discourse of a 'culturally different' agenda has enabled researchers to gain considerable insights into the alienation of the Islander in schooling. For instance, research into incongruent strategies in curricula and pedagogical techniques highlighted practices that were not appropriate to Islanders. But without an analysis of differential power affiliated with particular cultural discourses and practices, the recognition of 'difference' can amount to a resignation to 'difference' and to a 'lack' of 'institutional power' and 'capital'. That is, while teachers, curricula and academic institutions across the country have become aware of and implemented projects based on culture, the recognition of cultural differences has mostly resulted in ways for researchers and practitioners to explain the Islander's existence, the Islander's resistance and the Islander's failure. Relevance or sensitivity to cultural differences alone however does not change traditional classroom practices from alienating the Islander in formal learning processes.

It may appear here that future policies require a departure from the more favoured cultural premise to other conceptual themes and representations. Or, it may appear to others that policy only requires additional themes. However, to represent the Islander in other thematic schemas without making problematic 'culture' as in a political position would be to accept underpinning schemas, and to accept apparatuses that will again serve to embed fundamental apolitical positions between the state and the Islanders. Allow me to turn to this now.

Culture, in a political position, and as it sits in the national policy statement, has been a term used to posit within defined boundaries allowable, apolitical identities and traditions. For example, while inter-pretations of the Islander as the nation's living heritage are acceptable

in policy, political interpretations of the Indigenous peoples with prior rights to this continent are posited outside acceptable definitions. That is, Indigenous people can have a presence in a history that belongs to some distant tradition 'culture' but not in a history of invasion and stealth of their land and resources. Culture, then, can be seen as the premise for a system of inclusionary and exclusionary practices where ideas are either won or lost. The supremacy of one over the other prevails as authority over the other, as either honoured or silenced, as positive or negative.

As an inclusionary/exclusionary apparatus, the cultural subject in policy offers in a public domain a premise where the Islander can be read about as culturally exotic, understood as traditionally oriented, or predicted as aesthetically rich; and, in turn, it offers the content to hold Islanders to account for their traditions without ever visiting the islands. Hence, the anthropological exotica of native culture (e.g. Said's Orientalist) is composed as a new pantheon of quasi-metaphysical conditions and standards to live up to (Williams, 1977). If I fail to conduct myself according to the exotic standards I could be seen as 'un-Islander like', or to be neglecting traditional values, or worse still as 'buying into Western values'. In short, the imposition of disciplinary and disciplining standards calls in the Islander to measure herself/himself against the new public knowledge and to juxtapose what she/he does daily as marginal and private.

Culture in policy as defined within acceptable categories is no threat to the state because it sets up a public knowledge where individuals can self-regulate their own behaviours (e.g. internalising culture as the rudimentary premise for viewing and solving problems). Control and discipline are assured through self-regulation and yet operate outside the state. The effect of culture as a disciplining concept, then, not only works as a self-regulating device for the Islander but also serves as the mechanism that works for those in charge — except power is not exercised over another. Once regulated and positioned in the cultural discourse, the culturalised Islander exercises power over herself/himself.

As a disciplinary concept, culture has become the mode to identify with a position to assert rights, a guide to develop a future; and yet to conform with the cultural identity as an apolitical, ahistorical, docile subject of the past, the Islanders give up their standpoint on the material realities confronting their own situation. This is because culture constitutes simultaneously the premise where the Islanders can be disciplined, divided and marginalised.

Nevertheless, culture does set out the positive thesis, the ideal and the target of government initiatives. All are able to view the governments as doing the best they can. And as a document with humanitarian appeal, culture in policy stands as an authorised domain either for anyone to romanticise the Islander or recall the Islander to account for herself/ himself. For example, ongoing government projects and ongoing low-performances in schooling have led the general public to form an opinion of the education of Islander people as 'not trying hard enough' or that the government is dealing with an 'intractable problem'. Yet the national policy, as a public (i.e. democratically processed with Indigenous education consultants) document, which sets — and has set for the past eighteen years — the educational agenda for the schools (i.e. schools that continue to fail Islander students), receives little attention.

Culture in policy as authorised knowledge, as public knowledge, as manufactured knowledge is a treatise on the Islander that provides the means for education experts to measure, gauge, evaluate and forecast future priorities in schooling, curricula, pedagogics, research, funding and other educational programs for the Islander. As a precursor to the classroom, the Islander student can be made accountable through the cultural apolitical themes: where cultural values are honoured and where political statements are shunned; where conformist behaviours are rewarded and deviants are punished; where positive aspects of the cultural interpretations (e.g. art, song and dance) are applauded, Land Rights 'attitudes' are ridiculed and claims to Sea Rights are held to be an 'unreasonable' demand.

The culturalist agenda has become practice among education experts who have taken up positive aspects of the myths of their discipline and, in turn, constituted new knowledge without any knowledge of the Islander people. It has set up as a positive (liberal) goal that preserves primary disciplinary and disciplining apparatuses already in place between the state and the people and, in these ways, reifies a long practice that continues to silence the standpoints of the Islanders.

As 'culture' continues to be deployed today without a critique of underlying theoretical schemas, the various forms of representation of the Islander will effectively continue as a fundamental part of the problem as readily as it has been shown to be a fundamental part of the solution. As Foucault (1977) found with prison reforms, the innovation and not the displacement of the great models of punitive imprisonment meant that, 'before providing a solution, [the models]…themselves posed problems: the problem of their existence and the problem of their diffusion' (p. 120).