

## **Submission to HREOC Rural and Remote Education Inquiry - #168**

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### **Preamble**

This submission examines issues concerning the quality of educational services for students (predominantly Torres Strait Islander) at Thursday Island State High School. The submission specifically addresses the following aspects;

- *teacher incentives, professional development and retention;*
- *the cultural appropriateness of education services to Torres Strait Islander children and their communities.*

Both aspects will be examined from the point of view of how they impact upon the Torres Strait Islander students' human rights in relation to education.

According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, incorporating Articles 1, 6 and 13, Islander students at Thursday Island SHS are entitled to educational experiences which;

- *foster social and cultural development (Article 6.2);*
- *develop a sense of dignity (Article 13.1);*
- *promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all racial groups (Article 13.1);*
- *are free and appropriately accessible (Article 13.1b)*

The Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959) also provides relevant guidance;

#### *Principle 7*

*The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgement, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.*

Furthermore, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UNWGIP, 1986) have stated that Indigenous students are entitled;

*...to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as...artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature...*

International law also guarantees the Torres Strait Islander communities, including on Thursday Island, the right to determine their own educational priorities and to establish their own educational institutions, as well as the right to be taught their own history and culture. Article 27 of ILO 169 states;

*1. Education programmes and services for the peoples concerned shall be developed and implemented in co-operation with them to address their special needs, and shall incorporate their histories, their knowledge and technologies, their value systems and their further social, economic and cultural aspirations.*

*2. The competent authority shall ensure the training of members of these peoples and their involvement in the formulation and implementation of education programmes, with a view to the progressive transfer of responsibility for the conduct of these programmes to these peoples as appropriate.*

*3. In addition, governments shall recognise the right of these peoples to establish their own educational institutions and facilities, provided that such institutions meet minimum standards established by the competent authority in consultation with these peoples. Appropriate resources shall be provided for this purpose.*

Torres Strait Islander students have the right to learn their own language. Article 28(1) of ILO 169 states

*1. Children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong. When this is not practicable, the competent authorities shall undertake consultations with these peoples with a view to the adoption of measures to achieve this objective.*

Whilst promoting local languages through the school curriculum, Torres Strait Islander students also have the right to learn and master the English language. Article 28(20) states

*2. Adequate measures shall be taken to ensure that these peoples have the opportunity to attain fluency in the national language or in one of the official languages of the country.*

The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has not yet been adopted by the General Assembly, sets out several rights pertinent to education.

*15. Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and*

*control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own culture and language. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes.*

*31. Indigenous peoples, as a specific form of exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, including culture, religion, education, information, media, health, housing, employment, social welfare, economic activities, land and resources management, environment and entry by non-members, as well as ways and means for financing these autonomous functions.*

Article 31 of ILO 169 provides that nationwide efforts should be undertaken to ensure that;

*school curricula portray Indigenous groups accurately;*

*Educational measures shall be taken among all sections of the national community, and particularly among those that are in most direct contact with the peoples concerned, with the object of eliminating prejudices that they may harbour in respect of these peoples. To this end, efforts shall be made to ensure that history textbooks and other educational materials provide a fair, accurate and informative portrayal of the societies and cultures of these peoples.*

Following on from Article 31, on a national level, a pertinent document for ensuring the culturally appropriate education of Torres Strait Islander students is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1993:4) is based upon four main principles: the involvement of Indigenous peoples in educational decision making; equality of access to education; equity of educational participation; and, fair and appropriate educational

In this submission, it will be argued that Thursday Island SHS aims to satisfy all of the requirements for culturally appropriate education for Torres Strait Islander students, so that their human rights, as outlined above, will not be infringed. However, because of contextual, financial, structural and institutional factors beyond the immediate control of Thursday Island SHS staff, anomalies occur with educational experiences offered to students which could be construed as infringing upon the students' human rights. These anomalies will be critiqued in the following sections.

## **Introduction**

Thursday Island SHS operates as a remote Education Queensland state high school. It is larger of two secondary schools in the Torres Strait region, the smaller being Bamaga 6-

12 Campus on Cape York Peninsula. Thursday Island SHS caters for the majority of secondary school students in the Torres Strait. Being a remote school, a number of challenges are faced daily by the administrative and teaching staff, and the students and their community, which are unique to remote areas in general, and the Torres Strait in particular.

This submission focuses upon two main aspects of the terms of reference, as mentioned above. These aspects are more concerned with the effects of specific remote education difficulties upon the major participants in education, namely teachers and students, than with infrastructure and technological issues. However, structural and institutional factors do impact substantially upon the quality of students' and teachers' experiences, as will be demonstrated.

The data referred to throughout the submission have been drawn from Ph.D case study research undertaken by Ms Whatman between 1996 and 1999 at Thursday Island SHS. Permission to use student, teacher and community interview transcripts has been granted.

## **The Issues**

### *Teacher incentives*

Education Queensland has identified Thursday Island SHS as a remote school under the Remote Area Incentive Scheme (RAIS). Under RAIS, teachers are entitled to relocation allowances and salary "topups" for moving to what is generally regarded as a very expensive place to live. However, many teachers do not view RAIS as being a successful strategy to overcome the disadvantages both personally, financially and career-wise for moving to Thursday Island;

*About offering cash bonuses and that. But that's been a big flop anyway. The tax is just immense, so a lot of people are worse off than they were before. What sort of incentive is that for people to stay?*

(interview transcript, male teacher).

A Former Admin member insisted that "more money is not the answer" to getting admin and non-Islander teachers to stay longer. He cited the example of another remote community in which he had worked: more money would not have enticed him to stay there one day longer, because of the lifestyle and other problems. On Thursday Island, the travelling gets to him - he is "*sick of flying, and spending all day to get somewhere*" (interview transcript).

### *Professional development*

Due to the school's relatively small student population (varies between 350-400), Thursday Island SHS has a limited budget, with very small allocations for teacher

professional development. This would be a common feature of many remote schools. However, Thursday Island has the added difficulty of being accessible only by aircraft from Cairns or by boat from Cape York Peninsula. The sheer cost of travel, coupled with limited options, makes opportunities for professional development extremely limited, if not non-existent;

*I mentioned professional isolation as a possible negative factor, to which he agreed. The former deputy gave the example of when the Science Teacher's Association sent a fax to the school, advertising a meeting in Cairns for 4-6pm on a Thursday afternoon. "Ludicrous", was how he described it! Budget for conferences and things were also mentioned. I told him that a teacher had said they get \$250, which does not even pay for airfare. He agreed this was a problem, and gave a round figure of \$40 000 being necessary to give teachers adequate money for professional development, which is just not possible with their budget, being dependent on student load (360 students in 1997).*

(interview with deputy principal).

### *Retention*

Perceptions that Thursday Island is a less desirable teaching destination have affected the transfer and retention rates;

*T.I. is a good school and a much better community and standard of living than many other places. It suffers from an image problem which isn't accurate, to a great extent. The apathy is certainly there, but the images of racial unrest, primitive living, and uncontrollable school children are just not true. There is always potential for racial conflict or disagreement, but that is never imminent. Many non-Islander and Islander people can, and do live very happily on the Island.*

(interview transcript, Deputy Principal).

As a result of poor perception of Thursday Island as both a place of work and community to live in, the school does not necessarily attract teaching staff who will remain in the community for extended periods of time. A former Admin member at Thursday Island SHS described three typical categories of teachers who arrive on staff;

- "a) the young graduates who think they've been sent to the worst school in Queensland and can't wait until their time is up. They don't make friends, are very lonely and don't fit in to T.I. life at all...they tend to have the most behaviour problems in their classes as well;*
- b) the refugees : who are getting away from the city, and have no particular interest in that school or community - as long as it is far away from where they were*

- before. These people are running away from something, and generally, contribute little to the school in the long term;*
- c) *the upwardly mobile, principal hopefuls - the teachers who want H.O.D. jobs (and can achieve this at an earlier age in remote schools), with a view to eventually getting admin positions. These teachers are prepared to stay in a remote school for a bit longer than the mandatory two years, as it give them more 'brownie points', which will help with promotion. They also tend to initiate new programs etc, as this will look good as well, on the CV. The commitment to innovation is there, but the best interests of the students are not necessarily the main motivation!"*

(interview with former admin member).

The essential problem with such teachers on staff, in terms of their impact upon students' experiences, is that a general lack of commitment may exist or their commitment is perceived to be non-existent by the community;

*"Yeah. It's very difficult because people do two years then they take off. You know, admin is no different....Well, (former admin staff member) – he's done two years and he's out of here. So, you know, pretty much to the day that he arrived. He arrived mid-year, he's leaving mid-year. And the previous Principal was the same. So, I don't know what that does for community perceptions of the school either... they're just using it as a stepping stone to get somewhere else. Not all of them have been like that, but some, it has been very obvious. And if it's obvious to us, then it's obvious to the community. Yeah, I always get (community) people asking me about it as well.."*

(interview transcript, male teacher).

With such a high turnover of staff, the ability of the school to foster effective relations with the community has been compromised. The community looks upon new staff members with a past-justified sense of cynicism, which the new staff members do not fail to notice. They often withdraw from the community as much as possible (it is quite feasible to live, work and socialise on Thursday Island without much interaction, outside of the school, with Torres Strait Islander community members) as a means of self-protection. Why beat your head against a brick wall of hostility and indifference?

Staff turnover affects the quality of curriculum planning and implementation. With staff leaving at every term, entire departments can be replaced within one year, as occurred in the Home Economics department at the time of interviewing. New staff members have enough to cope with as it is, let alone being expected to take a proactive role in developing new curricula. In larger, city schools, new, young teachers can reasonably expect to fit into a larger department with more experienced staff who take the major responsibility for curriculum planning. At Thursday Island SHS, teachers do not have that luxury.

They also do not have the opportunity to see their curriculum efforts develop over time;

*I mean, I've only been here for a year, K's only been here for a year. You need to be here five years to get things like that set up properly. I mean, we've done different things, set up a few things since we've been here, but things like that take a long time to get going.*

(interview transcript, female teacher).

The high turnover of staff, particularly administrative staff, is also problematic in terms of the school's direction in policies and curriculum. Each new principal and deputy principal brings new expectations, priorities and preferences to the job which, coupled with high turnover, results in an destabilising effect on the school. This can only be to the detriment of the students;

*"The school will have been through 3 Principals and 3 Deputies in 18 months - incredibly destabilising, as each admin person brings their own ideas with them."*

(interview transcript, deputy principal)

These comments about staff turnover, and how they may impact upon the education rights of Torres Strait Islander students, also need to be balanced against the right of teachers to determine their own career paths, and choose where and for how long they work in a particular place. You cannot force teachers to stay when they want to leave, so the emphasis has to be on finding the right kind of incentive for the right kind of employee. Some people will never believe that incentives offered are enough to stay on Thursday Island to bring stability to the teaching staff, and, hence, the school curriculum. So, strategies need to be implemented which identify the "right people" for the job – people who bring commitment to the community to their work (not just commitment 'to their job') and find rewarding incentives to match the people.

Teachers who live in the community for short periods of time cannot properly learn about Torres Strait Islander culture and community life. Most teachers at Thursday Island SHS are non-Indigenous and have come from the major cities and know nothing about the Torres Strait when they arrive;

*"Yeah, because I have met heaps of people through the community and through that, so you get a bit of a better idea of what they're on about. Whereas some of these other people come up from Brisbane and they've got no idea....Like, I've had a pretty easy transition compared with some of the people. I imagine someone coming from Brisbane to TI must be a bit of a shock for them."*

(interview transcript, male teacher).

- SW - *Ok, so how much notice did you get before coming up?*  
 X - *Seven days.*  
 SW - *Seven days? Hmm. And did the department give you any idea what it would be like at Thursday Island?*  
 X - *No. Nup...*  
 SW - *Just rang you up..*  
 X - *Want a job, here you go!*

(interview transcript, female teacher).

The lack of knowledge about the Torres Strait is certainly not the fault of teachers. They have little if any opportunity to learn about the Torres Strait in pre-service training and often are given obscenely short notice to pack up and move to Thursday Island to commence work. Many teachers cited a week as the standard length of time – one teacher was given as short notice as 2 working days! More pressing matters, such as travel, organisation of personal belongings and finalising accommodation issues both in their previous and intended locations will occupy the minds of new staff rather than finding out what the culture and community expectations are like. Education Queensland continues to operate its' transfer and appointment procedure in the manner described above and this is one of the more damaging structural problems affecting teaching and learning in remote areas which must be addressed.

#### *Cultural Appropriateness of Educational Experiences*

The cynicism which greets new staff members is not restricted to parents and other community members. The school students have also been quite critical at times of their learning experiences with teachers. Sometimes, the criticisms arise from a conflict in understanding, mismatches in students and teachers conceptions about learning, and incongruent learning styles;

*“(We need a) better deal for the students...Teachers really showing, when they’re teaching students about any of these topics, really put their impressions into it....Because sometimes, they just talk and talk and talk, and you just sit there and get really bored....And they just show the same videos and that, and we don’t really get much from just watching a video...Or just doing research. Students don’t do research. We just sit there and yarn. It’s boring, I mean, we need to learn. Like, they are supposed to teach us.*

(interview transcript, female student).

Other students expressed a desire for a particular style of teaching (and learning) in health education which was not being adopted by teachers at Thursday Island SHS;



- X *They need to get someone who's suffering from smoking or heart disease or something. And if they voluntarily came in and gave a talk about what they're suffering and coming from a person who knows, and not someone who's guessing or is just quoting statistics..*
- SW *Or have read about it..*
- X *..and that, it would be more effective, I reckon.*

(interview transcript, female student).

The preference for reality teaching was also corroborated by the experiences of health workers who periodically taught at the high school;

*We've noticed that visual stuff has more of an impact. Especially with island people, they are more visual. If you stand in front and talk talk, they just switch off...And um, but if you show them something, you get their attention. It's like with island people, you have to show them first before they believe.*

(interview transcript, female Islander health worker).

*And its through sharing life experiences, or anything that is through drama or you know. Anything to make them think "gee, I'd like to find out now what to do" sort of thing.*

(interview transcript, male Islander health worker)

*And the thing is, one of the things that really makes them think is, once you relate them to their family experiences, you know?...Talking to "Uncle so and so", or "big brother so and so". Who was in that car accident, or who got lost in the boat because he had...once they make the link with that, pry into that experience - that's their relative, or they know this person, and he was young. You can see it on their faces when people are learning and when people are not. You can see when somebody is switched off. But most of them switch on with family experiences.*

(interview transcript, male Islander health worker).

Regardless of the teachers' intentions in the way they structure learning activities, the feedback given above indicates that there has been a mismatch in the expectations of students about how they should learn and how teachers should teach. A cultural basis underpinning this misunderstanding cannot be discounted. Yet, with the minimal levels of cultural knowledge which many teachers bring with them to the school, and the short periods of time they stay at the school, the opportunities for improving teachers' cultural understanding are quite limited.

Of course, learning opportunities are to some extent prescribed by the syllabus. Senior students in particular are expected to demonstrate "autonomous learning", self-directed research and the like. This type of learning was strongly criticised by some senior students who questioned the relevance of such an approach to their needs. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, and Articles 27 and 31 of the ILO indicated that relevant, enjoyable and useful educational opportunities should be offered to Torres Strait Islander students (1993: 4). Such learning opportunities should be developed in conjunction with communities with a view to transferring full responsibility over the to communities in the future (Articles 27 and 31). With a school staff which is two-thirds non-Islander, and little or no opportunity for community members to have input into the traditional curriculum areas of the school (not just "Islander studies"), Thursday Island SHS is a long way off achieving these aims.

### *Induction into Torres Strait Islander Culture*

Induction opportunities for teachers arriving at Thursday Island has also been highlighted as an issue affecting cultural relations. In the past, teachers have cited no opportunity for induction, or the programs which have been offered have only operated once at the start of the academic year. Teachers are leaving and arriving at Thursday Island SHS every term, so three-quarters of arriving staff missed out on induction.

*The school didn't even mention it when I started here. Didn't even show me any policy documents. Or anything. And also, the only cultural stuff we did was some in-service on custom.*

(interview transcript, male teacher).

*SW When you got your first posting, did the department of education have any information for you about Thursday Island?*

*X No, I got told about 2 days before school started. So, I just had to get up here. There was no information, nothing sent to me. But there is a video and an information pack than some people got. I didn't get it*

(interview transcript, male teacher).

The accounts of the few staff members who did receive the induction workshop at the start of the academic year indicated that it was very useful;

*Yes we had that. We had, well especially being first year, we had a meeting every Wednesday afternoon. And the first time, they sort of took me around to various places and showed me what they were. We had like, cause I was in the meetings every Wednesday afternoon, we had cultural awareness. Everyone who is new to the school goes to that for the first week. We learned about islander culture, and we had guest speakers come in to help us learn about the Torres Strait culture.*

(interview transcript, female teacher).

Again, with such a majority of teachers being non-Islander, and mostly ignorant about their new environment when they arrive, induction opportunities are critical.

### *Policy Dissemination*

With the multitude of policies and international declarations on the educational rights of Indigenous students, you would expect at least a small proportion of the policies to be commonly understood by teachers. This is not the case;

*I wouldn't say that they are the type of things that are really obvious in schools here at all. You don't arrive and they hand you a policy handbook or something like that.*

(interview transcript, female teacher).

If a teacher is not aware of a policy or preferred curriculum arrangements within a given community, they cannot be expected to find out without any assistance. Education Queensland, through the school administration, has the prime responsibility for ensuring the information is disseminated to teachers as they arrive in the community.

However, conversations with senior policy officers within Education Queensland have highlighted the frustrations they have experienced with the dissemination of such material;

*Anything with an Aboriginal design or logo of some sort on the cover gets handed straight over to the Aboriginal liaison person within the school. Admin don't even look at it.*

(interview transcript, Indigenous Education policy officer).

So, while this submission asserts that Education Queensland needs to ensure the people at the coalface are receiving the information, workers within the system are encountering difficulties with doing so. Clearly, new approaches to the dissemination of this information need to be trialled. It could be as simple as repackaging information so that it is not arbitrarily deemed by school administration as being "for the Aboriginal liaison person". Or, more complex methods of dissemination and verification mechanisms might need to be explored. Either way, the current situation of "lost" policies and teacher ignorance of such policies cannot continue to exist without negatively affecting the educational experiences of Torres Strait Islander students.

### *Language Issues*

One third of the teaching staff at Thursday Island SHS are Islander, and can therefore, use and promote local languages in accordance with Human Rights Declarations. The remainder cannot. Creole (or "Broken") is not offered to teachers who arrive in the community (for example, as a TAFE subject) so apart from picking up a few words from

community talk, non-Islander teachers are unlikely to acquire the language sufficiently well to promote it with their students. Article 28 (1) cannot be substantially fulfilled at present.

Also, the Torres Strait community has strenuously lobbied for intensive English language programs for their children at school. This is in accordance with National policy and Article 28 (20). So, Thursday Island SHS has an English literacy program which emphasises the acquisition of good English speaking and written standards across every discipline. Focusing time and energy on promoting English is sometimes at odds with allowing students to use Creole in the classroom. Teachers have mentioned this as a problem.

### **Some Suggested Strategies for consideration**

The high school, in conjunction with major community groups, should devise a comprehensive induction program using the compulsory 4 days of induction leave to which every new staff member is entitled. These should be scheduled at least twice a year, to cater for mid-term or mid-year staff changes, and should incorporate a proportion of existing staff who arrived before the induction program began. Should staff be required urgently at the school to fill a vacancy at short notice, **Education Queensland should provide funding to employ a relief teacher to commence work while the new teacher has time to arrange their travel and complete proper induction. Lack of time should not be an excuse to circumvent fair and reasonable notice and proper community induction.**

The induction program could be extended to include a “mentor system”, whereby newly inducted teachers are paired up with Torres Strait Islander teachers/staff who can informally continue the awareness raising process. **Also, community members who participate in the program could be targeted to support particular curriculum areas.** For example, HPE teachers could meet community members from the Health departments and Sport and Recreation department. **These would be strategic alliances which would assist with the development of culturally appropriate learning experiences for students in different subject areas.**

Education Queensland should trial new policy dissemination procedures. For example, Indigenous education policies should be sent out with letters of employment to every teacher sent to schools with significant Indigenous student populations. **With the advent of email accounts for many teachers in the state, electronic dissemination of news and policies could be a significant improvement on how this information reaches the coalface of teaching.**

**Programs which promote the regional training of Indigenous teachers need to be supported and extended.** Schools like Thursday Island SHS need to have higher percentages of qualified Indigenous staff. These teachers must have recognised teaching

degrees, to counter perceptions of "inferior teaching standards" sometimes held by other staff and the students and community\*

*(\*Many parents in the Torres Strait already send their children to boarding schools down south. This is because there is a community perception of "slackness" in learning and discipline at Thursday Island SHS. Some teachers (both Islander and non-Islander) have also expressed a concern that if quasi-qualified Islander teachers were to dominate the school, standards of student literacy, at the very least, would decline. This is not a justifiable concern in my view.)*

## **Conclusion**

There are many issues affecting the educational experiences of Torres Strait Islander students at Thursday Island SHS. The teachers at Thursday Island SHS are working within the paradigm of "usual school procedures" - mostly a coping mechanism - which are not necessarily the best procedures for a remote school. The teachers are not being 'deviant' or uncaring or overtly racist in their approaches to teaching. Inappropriate practices are mostly the result of poor information dissemination, disabled communication channels between education stakeholders, unfair working conditions (and expectations), 'fall-back' coping strategies only used in the absence of something better, and a myriad of other causes which cannot be attributed to poor practice or 'slack' intentions of teachers.

Some basic tenets of Human Rights concerning the education of Torres Strait Islander children are not being fulfilled due to logistical, structural and systematic factors mostly beyond the influence of individual teachers. These include the inability to teach in local languages wherever possible (due to a majority non-Islander staff), the un-likelihood of the community eventually taking control of educational organisations (committees and advisory groups do not run the school - Education Queensland does, with its "white procedures and protocols"). Students sometimes cannot see the relevance or applicability to their individual situations of mainstream curriculum offerings and teaching approaches, so relevance will always be difficult to demonstrate.

On a positive note, most of the aims ascribed to in the international laws and national policies are being attempted or achieved to some degree. Hopefully, the few issues raised in this submission will be within the jurisdiction of the HREOC Inquiry in Rural and Remote Education and positive change may result.

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