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“Principal, He’s the Boss:”

Power, Culture and Schooling on Saibai in the Torres Strait Islands



Jenny Davis

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For
Akabu Waia
In loving memory

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines issues of power, culture and schooling as they apply to an indigenous community located on Saibai Island in the Torres Strait of northern Australia. The thesis combines literature research with ethnography to consider Saibaian schooling in various contexts. These include the history of schooling in the region, the relevant educational literature and the actual physical and social contexts of schooling on Saibai. Early chapters deal with methodology, history and educational literature. Later chapters deal with ethnographic material using the themes of separation, culture and collaborative decision-making to organise the data. The work of Michel Foucault informs the analytical approach to issues of power. Hence power is considered to be ubiquitous, productive and linked to issues of knowledge and culture. School principals are identified as key figures in schooling and therefore play a major role in the thesis. As the principals are all men of non-Islander (anglo) backgrounds, this thesis represents a significant break from works within the realm of indigenous education that are heavily influenced by cultural anthropology and tend to focus only on the Aboriginal or Islander participants as objects of study.

The thesis considers how Saibaian people are excluded from schooling through various techniques and practices that tend to place the principal in a position of autocracy *vis a vis* the school. Furthermore, I show how various schooling practices that aim to include community members in schooling are shaped and transformed such that they actually serve to entrench the principal in his position of control over schooling. This applies even in the way that cultural activities are incorporated into the school illustrating that no aspect of schooling is immune to relations of power. Indeed, the notion of Saibaian Islanders belonging to a unique cultural group is used by some principals to argue that they are unsuited to roles within the school's decision-making process. Ultimately, then, this thesis is about relations between school principals and community members in the context of schooling on Saibai Island.

PREFACE

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASSPA	Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program
DAIA	Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs
DCS	Department of Community Services
DNA	Department of Native Affairs
ESL	English as a Second Language
GFS	Girls' Friendly Society
KKY	Kala Kawa Ya
KLY	Kala Lagaw Ya
LMS	London Missionary Society
LOTE	Languages Other Than English
MU	Mothers' Union
P and C	Parents' and Citizens' Association
PCAP	Priority Country Area Program
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RATEP	Remote Area Teacher Education Project
SDP/CSR	School Development Plan/Community School Review
SPSSS	Special Priority Schools Support Scheme
TI	Thursday Island
TSIRECC	Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Consultative Committee

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