

**‘We're the mob you should be listening to’:
Aboriginal Elders talk about community-
school relationships on Mornington Island**

**Thesis submitted by
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School of Education, James Cook University**

Declaration on Sources

I declare that this is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H 1076).

Hilary Bond

Date

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My teacher, *Balyarini Kulthangar* died on 31 October, 2003. It is a tragedy that he will not see the finished document that we worked on together. He was my inspiration, my best friend, and my brother-in-law, a wise and knowledgeable Elder, a caring father to his people, Mayor of Mornington Island, my co-researcher and my major informant. Most of all, he wanted the children of Mornington Island to be educated about their own culture, *Kunhunhamandaa* Law, to respect and listen to their Elders and be educated in both worlds. He wanted a good relationship with ‘whitefellas’ so we could work together for the common good of the students. Last year he related to me a vision that really concerned him. He told me:

Old *Chuloo*, *Goomungee*, *Shirokee* and mefella were on our way to my country. We were walking blackfella style, you know, no clothes, just our spears and we were about to cross the Dugong River. These kids, blackfella kids stopped us. There were about fifty of themfellas. They had ghetto blasters on real loud. They were drunk, carrying cartons and shouting. They told us to turn back. We had no choice but to turn around and go back to town. You know, Hilary, that vision told me that very soon we would have no culture left. When our Elders die that knowledge turns to dust. When we are buried our knowledge is buried with us.

I promise you, *yugud Kulthangar*, that this ‘university book’, as you called my thesis, will carry your words, and people all over Australia, ‘black’ and ‘white’, will read what was in your heart.

I wish to thank the Elders, Lawmen and senior women of Mornington Island for your years of laughter, stories (both secular and sacred), your teaching, your untiring support, friendship, love and compassion. Thank you to Hilary, Hugh, *Kulthangar* and Kippy, Cecily, Clara, Ida and Granny Margaret for adopting me into your family and for always caring for me and sharing your lives with me.

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Abstract

The thesis explores the relationships the Elders of Mornington Island, a ‘closed’, geographically-remote Aboriginal community, perceive as prevailing between the school and the community, and the relationships that they believe should exist between the community and the local school and its teachers. The Elders, or Lawmen, a body of Aboriginal senior men, see themselves as the repositories and teachers of tribal Aboriginal Law that has been handed down from their Creation Ancestors for thousands of years and is still being handed down. The thesis documents and explores their accounts of the relationships they have had with non-Aboriginal people in the past and, in particular, the relationships they prefer to have with the teachers and school respectively. This thesis does not explore the perspectives or cultural narratives of the schoolteachers or administrators.

The thesis draws on critical theory, seeing both the wider society and the local society of Mornington Island as dynamic structures in which some sectors of society, in this case Aboriginal people, are oppressed, with dire consequences in many aspects of their individual and collective lives. It also draws on critical theory in adopting an ethical position of solidarity with, and compassion for, those whose lives are thus impaired. It shares with the Elders this sense that Aboriginal people have been, and continue to be oppressed, and explores individual and institutional dimensions of race relations, manifested in ideology, physical coercion, personal attitude and interpersonal relations.

The main body of data comprises an extended series of open-ended conversational interviews with twenty-five Lawmen and eleven other senior Mornington Islanders. Initially conversations were tape-recorded, but at the request of participants, this practice was abandoned in favour of handwritten notes of interviews. All records of interviews were returned to the respective contributors (and read to them, where appropriate or necessary) for approval or amendment. In practice, these readings became the stimulus and occasion for further conversations. The thesis treats the material thus provided as reflecting and constructing a particular knowledge and understanding of the world; it makes no judgements about its ontological status or its epistemological foundations, but takes it at face value as an account of the world as the Elders encounter it. In analysing the material, the thesis identifies several key dimensions of their understandings of relations between community and school, and explores emergent themes within each of these

dimensions, with a view to recognising both the commonalities and multiplicities of views across interviews. In doing so, the thesis seeks to represent the Elders' views as fully as possible and to give pride of place to their understandings.

The Elders perceive that the secular past affects the present and that the sacred past is permanently present. In describing and accounting for the present and in constructing a proper future, they recurrently draw on the past. They construct the present and accounts of what should be, on the basis of both the eternal spiritual Law and the secular past. The secular past they recount is full of racism, inequality, loss and oppression. The normative present and future are fundamentally grounded in traditional Law: all relationships should be based on Law. The Elders are disappointed that the young people in the community do not know their relationship categories according traditional Law and that the community is characterised by disorder, collectively and individually. They attribute this disordered present to colonialism, past and present.

The Elders want better relations with school staff, but they see the teachers standing outside the structure of kin relations and as 'standoffish' and self-segregating. The Elders believe the teachers should be open, personally, and available to be incorporated by the community into its kin-based social structure. The Elders consider that the school gives them no voice in curriculum and pedagogy. They insist that they should be heard on such matters. They perceive the teachers as having a coercive pedagogy, and see their interest in the children as confined to the school. They insist that pedagogy ought to be caring and inclusive, that teachers should recognise, and extend their interest to, the wider context of students' lives, and that their pedagogy should reflect this. The Elders see the curriculum as a bastardised version of a mainstream, urban curriculum. The Elders insist that the curriculum should provide significant space for themselves to teach Law and culture and to be able to educate the young people in traditional ways. Equally, they insist that the Western component of the curriculum should be of the highest standard, by mainstream, urban criteria.

This study shows that the Elders have severe misgivings about both the prevailing relations and the contribution of the school to what they insistently refer to as their tribal community. It argues that the fact that the school appears this way to the Elders, as the senior figures of the community, is itself a problem, and that in so far as their views might be more widely shared, the problem is even more critical.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|------|
| Declaration on sources | | ii |
| Statement of access to the thesis | | iii |
| Electronic Copy | | iv |
| Declaration on ethics | | v |
| Acknowledgements | | vi |
| Abstract | | viii |
| Introduction | | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | Education and Aboriginal Communities: A critical review of the literature | 13 |
| Chapter 2 | Methodology | 46 |
| Chapter 3 | The Cultural-Social-Political Milieu | 91 |
| Chapter 4 | Past Events Live On to Shape the Present | 142 |
| Chapter 5 | Relationships between the Community, the Teachers and the School | 192 |
| Chapter 6 | The Lawmen discuss Curriculum and Pedagogy | 251 |
| Conclusion | | 305 |
| References | | 317 |
| Data Collection | | 353 |