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A DOG *of a* QCAT: COLLATERAL EFFECTS *of* MANDATED ENGLISH ASSESSMENT *in the* TORRES STRAIT

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■ Abstract

This paper critiques a 2008 Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) assessment initiative known as Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks, or QCATs. The rhetoric is that these centrally devised assessment tasks will provide information about how well students can apply what they know, understand and can do in different contexts (QSA, 2009). The QCATs are described as "authentic, performance-based assessment" that involves a "meaningful problem", "emphasises critical thinking and reasoning" and "provides students with every opportunity to do their best work" (QSA, 2009). From my viewpoint as a teacher, I detail my professional concerns with implementing the 2008 middle primary English QCAT in one case study Torres Strait Islander community. Specifically I ask "QCATs: Comparable with what?" and "QCATs: Whose authentic assessment?" I predict the possible collateral effects of implementing this English assessment in this remote Indigenous community, concluding, rather than being an example of quality assessment, colloquially speaking, it is nothing more than a "dog".

■ My relatedness

My contribution to this paper on English assessment in the Torres Strait acknowledges that I am a white Australian primary school teacher now lecturing in language and literacy in teacher education. In addition to these identities, I come to this topic through relations that, according to Karen Martin (2008, p. 69), are "physical, spiritual, political, geographical, intellectual, emotional, social, historical, sensory, instinctive and intuitive". In an attempt to come to know more about the entities of my relatedness to this topic, I consider the following questions: "From where do I come?", "What's my relationship to the entities within the Torres Strait?" and "What's my interest in writing an article about English assessment in the Torres Strait?"

I was born in the 1960s on *Wiradjuri* land in rural New South Wales to monolingual English-speaking working class parents of Norwegian and Irish heritage. This was around the same time that Torres Strait Islanders were permitted to vote in Federal and State elections and desegregated schooling ceased in the Torres Strait (Shnukal, 2002). As a child, I was raised as a monolingual English speaker on the red clay of *Yuggera* land, what Europeans call the Redland Shire (South-East Queensland), along the edges of *Quandamoopah* (Moreton Bay). It is here that I watched the dolphins in their habitat, and the Stradbroke Island ferry travel between *Minjerribah* (Stradbroke Island) and the mainland. My family no longer lives there, but when returning to attend a function one weekend, I heard the familiar din of children playing on the beaches and in the Moreton Bay fig trees. Like many shire students, I regularly travelled to *Minjerribah* to compete in interschool sports, undertake geography excursions and learn about contemporary Indigenous culture, in particular, the elder, poet, writer, artist and educator Oodgeroo Noonucal. This is not to suggest that in any way I came to "see" or "be" Indigenous. To the contrary, our geography assignments on the sand-island formation of *Minjerribah*, *Bummeria* (perched Brown Lake) and *Myora* (Freshwater Springs) were founded on the Western knowledge system of land forms. These ways of understanding the world as a physical entity stood in stark contrast to those expounded by Karen Martin's

clear and strong Indigenous understandings of the relatedness between entities, country, people and land (2008, p. 70). Our learning *about* contemporary Indigenous culture never included learning *from* or deep questions about other ways of knowing.

After completing secondary schooling, I undertook tertiary studies and became a primary school teacher in the mid 1980s. This was around the same time that the Queensland Department of Education took responsibility for the provision of education in the Torres Strait (Shnukal, 2002). During the next two decades, my interactions with Indigenous Australian people were limited to teaching those who attended city-based schools and/or preservice teacher education courses. Rather than being dialogical and facilitating a sharing of epistemologies and ontologies, curricula content and its pedagogies and assessment were firmly entrenched in mainstream discourses. My frustration at the pervasiveness of these discourses lead me to take up an idea mooted by a Brisbane-based Torres Strait Islander, who encouraged me to undertake my professional development experience in a *Maganiu Mala Kes Buai* (Torres Strait) community. Through communication with the Island community, I was able to spend five weeks *in situ* in the latter half of 2008.

My interest in producing the reflections in this paper was borne out of conversations with teachers and my own thoughts, observations and experiences during my time at one remote campus which I have called Tortol Island Campus. Nakata (2003, p. 12) laments the situation where:

> teachers themselves have a wealth of knowledge and experience in literacy teaching … but the isolation of the classroom, and the sheer workload limits and inhibits the opportunities for circulating, sharing and accessing this experiential knowledge. Not only does this knowledge not circulate very effectively but also it is not recorded or documented in any systematic way. This is particularly so where teachers are transitionary and take their hard-earned knowledge with them when they leave.

We, as a collective of professionals, were frustrated by what we believed was another "setting up for failure" experience for remote Indigenous communities and their teachers by educational regulators, this time the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), with the 2008 middle primary Queensland Comparable Assessment Task, otherwise known as a "QCAT".

To re-iterate, I am neither Indigenous nor am I experienced in teaching and learning in these contexts. As problematic as these two points are (see Nakata, 1997, 2001), I am in many ways typical of the raft of inexperienced white Australian teachers assigned to (temporary) positions in remote Indigenous communities. By penning this article, it is neither my intention to contribute to the silencing of Indigenous communities nor Indigenous educators; rather to add to the debate surrounding standardised assessment in remote Indigenous communities. My views give voice to teachers caught up in the fray.

■ Tortol Island: Context and its people

In line with university and Education Queensland ethics requirements, I can only provide general observations about the Torres Strait, Tortol Island (pseudonym) and its campus. The Torres Strait is an archipelago lying between the tip of Cape York and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. Of the 7500 people who live in the Torres Strait, around 80 percent are Indigenous. The two major industries are commercial fishing and a public sector servicing the population. The region is often considered as made up of three sub-regions: the Inner Islands, the Outer Islands and the Cape Islander communities.

The natural environment of Tortol Island can be thought of as comprising the fishing waters, the foreshore, areas of dense foliage and grassy hill tops. Whilst I was at Tortol Island, the long blanched grasses were ready to seed. I came to sense the rhythm of warm spring afternoon winds, especially on the western side of the island, and the fresh evening sea breeze that at times whisked into a gale. No-one swam in the pristine blue waters of the Torres Strait; the influx of *ari ari* (sardines) brought schools of preying tiger sharks to the shore line. I recall the smell of burning dry vegetation each afternoon as proud homeowners raked the leaves and lit miniature bonfires so that their space was without blemish. I came to understand Tortol Island as a highly functional community, with an active local council and commercial cooperative, and significant pride in the establishment of community centres, including a number of churches, a sports facility, health care facility, art cooperative, and plans to re-establish a privately leased fishing cooperative. Women as well as men undertook the senior organisational and advocacy roles.

The tyranny of distance made many aspects of everyday living a challenge. For example, my teaching colleague was without household water for two months whilst a new water pump was located and installed. When I compare experiences such as this with those when I lived in Roma in Western Queensland, and when my adult son lived in Toowoomba (on the Darling Downs, South East Queensland), I came to appreciate that this is neither a "people" nor a "cultural" issue, but due to distance and remoteness, a situation augmented by reliance on expensive air transport or the barge, which is regular but infrequent.

I also came to appreciate the close extended family arrangements that existed within the Torres Strait. Kin often reside at the one residence. Alternatively, immediate family members extend across a number

of islands for varying periods of time and for a range of reasons: parents seeking work on Thursday Island or the mainland; families temporarily dispersed whilst homes are being (re)built; brothers and sisters in secondary school attended boarding school hundreds of kilometres away on Thursday Island or on the mainland at Bamaga or in another major town, and; mothers relocated to Thursday Island or the mainland to prepare for the birth of a child or to accompany and care for elders admitted to hospital.

All of the students at Tortol Island Campus spoke a couple if not a few languages, only one of which is Standard Australian English (SAE). In these communities, vibrant and functional non-SAE oral practices fulfil diverse and specialised communicative and creative needs (see van Harskamp-Smith & van Harskamp-Smith, 1994). To highlight the differences in grammatical structure, vocabulary and metaphor between Ailan Tok (Torres Strait Creole, TSC), Meriam Mir (the language spoken generally by the older generation), and SAE, Shnukal (2002, p. 8) points out, "none of these other languages belongs to the same Indo-European language family as English". She also notes: "[l]ooked at objectively, most of the students" errors in written English occur as a result of transference from their first language, or in areas of grammatical complexity which pose problems for *all* English as second language learners" (Shnukal, 2003, p. 51). In drawing out the interconnections and interdependency between language and organisations of the social and cultural world, Shnukal (2002, p. 11) explains "[t]o learn another language is invariably to challenge our previous outlook and worldview, which had seemed so solid, so 'real', so uncontestable ..." This is because the form of the language, and the epistemologies and ontologies that it represents, *construct understandings of life and culture.* Thus, maintaining access to a first/home language is important for long term participation in local communities and for fulfilling creative and cultural expression. Drawing on personal communication with a range of teachers, students and community members from the Western Island of Badu and the Eastern Island of Ugar, van Harskamp-Smith and van Harskamp-Smith (1994) reinforce that competence in multiple languages enables a wider capacity for: flexibility in thinking; acquiring and passing on information, values, customs and history; understanding concepts and social interactions across cultures; and empathy for many points of view (see also Giugni, 2002).

There is tension between upholding and maintaining cultural difference and identity on the one hand, and producing equal educational outcomes to make Torres Strait Islanders competitive in the mainstream economy on the other hand (Nakata, 2003). Whilst chatting to locals, their strong commitment to Indigenous cultures and languages was noted, as was their views that English is the key to functioning in

the *Kole* (non-Indigenous) economic, political and educational community and especially for access to health care programs (see, van Harskamp-Smith & van Harskamp-Smith, 1994; Babia, 1997; Nakata, 1997, 2001; Shnukal, 2002; Giugni, 2002). Arthur and David-Petero's (2000) empirical survey concluded that being skilled in English increased Islanders" self-confidence as it gave them the power and the freedom to communicate with others.

To recount one of my own experiences, a Tortol Island Campus parent asked me to evaluate her son's English language skills. She wanted to know if he had "enough" English to do well at a mainland secondary school (fieldnotes). The Tortol Island Campus students presented with a great range of abilities as far as their active/passive knowledge of SAE was concerned. In addition to varying degrees of SAE competencies, the Tortol Island children all spoke Torres Strait Islander (TSI) Creole, and in some cases, another local dialect/vernacular. Out of consideration for my mono-lingualism, and in yet another demonstration of the accommodation of outsiders and the students' status as excellent language learners, the students changed their social communication to SAE when interacting with me. Their vehement pride in Creole and/or the local language was evident as they taught me some basic greetings and vocabulary. As the students explained on many occasions as we came to talk about the fish, periwinkles, fauna, food and cooking styles, "There is no English word, I have to teach you our word" (fieldnotes). This example illustrates that Indigenous language remains an important part of culture and identity. These students actively draw on their knowledge of multiple languages in resourceful and symbolic ways.

The island community did not hesitate to affirm *their commitment to high quality educational outcomes for their children.* My observations parallel earlier reports by Babia (1997) at Dauan State School and the Northern Island of Saibai, Nakata's (1997) historical recount of education in the Torres Strait, and Arthur and David-Petero's (2000) "Education, training and careers: Young Torres Strait Islanders" report. Commitment to education was evident, for example, when almost half the island population travelled to a neighbouring island to celebrate a religious event. The event was only supposed to be a couple of days, but heavy rain and wind squalls delayed their return for nigh on a week. Concerned about their children missing school, many caregivers sent their children to the school on the island that they were visiting. In a range of day-to-day demonstrations of their commitment to education, students often travelled significant distances to attend school each day. Other students planned their early morning fishing in order to allow time to return home, shower, eat and front up at school ready for the day's lessons. At Tortol Island Campus, homework was set weekly, and due

on a Friday. Almost all students completed this work and handed it to their teacher.

These dual themes of valuing education and desiring strong skills in English for school learning were also reinforced in interactions with both Brisbane-based and island-based community members. However, alongside this overt general commitment to education and multi-lingualism, tension surrounds personal and educational goals. For example, secondary school students attending boarding school (Arthurs & David-Petero, 1999), the role and function of Indigenous languages in formal education (see van Harskamp-Smith & van Harskamp-Smith, 1994), the absence of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in what is constructed as the knowledge of the most worth (see Nakata, 1997), the league tabling of state- and nation-wide standardised assessment, and department-based human resource issues. The existence of these issues should not be used to construct the Torres Strait community as dysfunctional; rather their ongoing engagement with the tensions serves as evidence of progressively orientated and critically reflective community. Also, issues of commitment to education, the league tabling of standardised assessment and department-based human resource matters consume the white Western middle-class Brisbane-based schools in which I am a consultant and researcher.

Tortol Island Campus has approximately 60 students, all Indigenous. The introduction of white Australian teachers into the Torres Strait Islands has had a chequered history. Shnukal (2002) draws on evidence that government teachers were appointed to the larger islands since the early 1900s, yet Annie Tyhuis's (Tyhuis et al., 2005) recount of schooling in the Torres Strait in the 1950s and 1960s claims that teachers in the outer islands were Torres Strait Islanders and Torres Strait Islander Creole was the medium of instruction. In 2008, the constitution of the teaching staff was different for each of the islands and even this changed throughout the course of a single year. At Tortol Island Campus at the time of my visit there were four teachers: two Torres Strait Islanders (one highly experienced and one beginning teacher) and two white Australian teachers (one highly experienced but working in an Indigenous school for the first time, and one beginning teacher who was also inexperienced in remote Indigenous contexts). The office administrator, education workers, RATEP (Remote Area Teacher Education Program) preservice teachers, tuckshop convenor, groundsman and cleaner were all Indigenous and together numbered about a dozen.

Whilst English was the only official language of instruction in Torres Strait schools during 2008, it was not always the case that the instructional or regulative discourse was undertaken solely in English (fieldnotes). There were times when students explored the minutia of concepts in a language other than English, and

then code-switched to SAE to deliver their conclusions. Code-switching is both rich and complex; its users act as agents of their own learning: mixing, transferring, trying out, adapting, and experimenting to determine appropriate practices and make decisions including when to exercise choice to enact agency (Giugni, 2002). Implicated within linguistic code-switching is the act of culture-switching, where aspects of one culture come to be known through another culture's resources.

With this framework of understanding in mind, I will now consider the objectives and challenges that are present for teachers when implementing QCATs and the problems associated with efforts to standardise learning outcomes. My views are not formed so much from deep knowledge of the Tortol Island and its people, for my visit only lasted five weeks. My views are also not formed from empirical research, for I was not in situ when the assessment task was implemented. Rather what follows are teacherly concerns that I, and teachers like me, have as we consider what standardised assessment tasks mean for particular groups of students. In many ways I am typical of the white inexperienced Australian teacher who finds themselves trying to make sense of educational initiatives designed for dominant social and cultural contexts. I empathise with teachers and communities as they seek to grapple with these complex social and cultural questions amidst an ever-changing educational landscape that (re)focuses on discourses of educational excellence, performance enhancement, efficiency and effectiveness of the workforce.

In the following section of this paper I present my concerns under three headings. In the next section I introduce the (subject) English assessment task. In the section which follows, I review the aims, claims and the rhetoric surrounding the task. In particular I focus on the concept of *comparability* with the language and cultural background knowledge for *Maganiu Mala Kes Buai* students. In the concluding section, I cast a cautionary lens on the use of (subject) English assessment tasks for students in one remote Indigenous community.

The Queensland Comparable Assessment Task for (subject) English

The assessment task, set by QSA and known as a QCAT (Queensland Comparable Assessment Task), was trialled in a number of locations in 2008 before being adopted statewide from 2009. QCATs are relatively new to the Queensland system. They are centrally devised assessment that QSA (2009) claims support teachers in making consistent judgements about the quality of student work. Such an aim is desirable, however, the work of QCATs is not limited to these outcomes alone. Other outcomes, as they are experienced in minority communities, need to be rendered visible.

QSA (2009) describe QCATs as authentic, performance-based assessment that:

- Involves a meaningful problem
- Emphasises critical thinking and reasoning
- Provides students with every opportunity to do their best work
- Produces evidence of what students know and can do in relation to a selection of Essential Learnings.

In 2008, QCATs were trialled in all Education Queensland schools in Year 4, 6 *or* 9 for (subject) English, Mathematics *or* Science. In 2009, all Year 4, 6 *and* 9 students completed QCATs in English, Mathematics *and* Science. In the 2008 iteration, students were given up to 90 minutes to complete the range of QCAT requirements. To maximise flexibility, teachers were given a window of eight school weeks in which to implement the QCAT assessment. It was not necessary for all tasks to be completed in the one sitting. QSA (2009) claims that QCATs reflect school-based assessment rather than external tests that require strictly controlled conditions of time. QSA (2009) claims that QCATs are neither intended nor suitable for use in measuring school or teacher effectiveness. QSA (2009) claims that QCATs provide information to teachers and students about what is working well and what needs attention; it is not recommended that teachers teach to them. QCATs are not about assessing what students have just learned; rather, according to QSA (2009), they provide information about how well students can apply what they know, understand and can do in different contexts.

In making visible the social and cultural "loadedness" of acts of teaching, Downey and Hart (2005, p. 43) explain that "teaching is more than simply instruction but embodies complex questions regarding the human condition ... It is informed by history, philosophy and just about every known discipline of study, and especially our own social knowledge". It stands to reason that assessment, as a function of the teaching and learning cycle, is inherently formed on the same premise. In light of this, the following question will be asked of the Year 4 2008 English QCAT: "QCATs – *comparable* with what?". My lens for doing so is framed by a focus on the lived reality of the students' lives so as to render visible the embedded cultural assumptions.

Separating puppies and dam, red collar ownership and a hybridised thank-you

The 2008 Year 4 (subject) English QCAT was focused on a little girl's lost puppy that could be identified by its red collar. Students had to produce a hybridised thank-you letter for the teacher who eventually located the puppy. The QCAT student booklet (QSA, 2008a) is set out in five sections:

- Setting the scene: Group discussion (p. 3);
- Product 1: Assembly message (pp. 4-7);
- Product 2: Noticeboard message (pp. 8-9);
- Product 3: Thank-you message (pp. 10-11); and
- Guide to making judgements – Year 4 English (p. 12).

"Setting the scene" requires students to actively engage in group discussion, whereas Products 1 through 3 require written responses. The back cover of the student book details the criteria schedule for teachers. In what follows, each section is considered in the order in which it is presented to students.

Setting the scene: Group discussion

The "Setting the scene" page has at its centre, a close up visual of a sullen young girl, leaning heavily on her arm with her dark brown eyes focused on the viewer, demanding attention. This visual is framed with the heading: *"Setting the scene: Group discussion"* and the by-line "Have you ever lost something? Losing things can be very upsetting, especially when the thing you lose is important to you." (QSA, 2008a, p 3). Below the picture, is the following text:

Emily is a Year 4 student who has lost her pet puppy, Rusty.

She loves her pet and is very upset that the puppy is missing.

Emily and her family have searched everywhere around her home but they can't find Rusty.

What can Emily do to find her pet?

How can Emily make sure that everyone at school knows that Rusty is missing?

How can Emily let people know how important Rusty is to her?

How *comparable* is this scenario with the lived experiences of the students from Tortol Island Campus? The following analysis highlights limited comparability:

Year 4 as a stage of schooling does not exist at Tortol Island Campus; rather schooling is structured in "Steps". The Tortol Island Campus has three steps which encompass students from four to 13 years of age.

There is no student with an Anglo name like Emily at Tortol Island Campus. At Tortol Island, there could be up to a dozen "family" members living in the one household. How could someone not have seen a wandering puppy? On Tortol Island, there are no fences for keeping dogs in. There are dogs on the island and

from my observation the dogs do not wander out of their territory unaccompanied, although they might leave their territory when accompanying their owner. On Tortol Island, the relationship between puppies and humans is different to that presented in this scenario. Puppies are not human pets, as we see reinforced by phrases such as *her pet puppy, her pet*. On Tortol Island, puppies belong to the dam until such time they are old enough to become the working companion of a boy nearing puberty. On Tortol Island, girls do not have pet puppies. Thus, on a comparability scale, the opening scenario shows a decisive mismatch between what is a lived experience for the mainsteam vis-a-vis the reality on Tortol Island.

Guide to making judgements: Year 4 English

After the group discussion, the teacher is instructed to lead the students through the *Guide to making judgements – Year 4 English*. The purpose of the guide is to focus students on the need to demonstrate "understanding and application of the key elements in successful messaging" (QSA, 2008a, p. 13). Teachers are instructed to help students "highlight the assessable elements" and to explain, "in student-friendly terms", the task-specific "descriptors" against which student responses will be judged. The guide cannot be presented for reasons of copyright. As a way of providing a sense of the magnitude of this undertaking, some of the "descriptors" that have to be communicated include:

- Identifies facts and responding meaningfully
- Identifies and interprets messages and represents meaning through choice of words, pictures and test elements
- Demonstrates control of language
- Makes judgements about the effectiveness of written and spoken messages

Bearing in mind that the average Year 4 student is somewhere between the ages of eight and 10 years, and at Tortol Island Campus may not have had their formative years of schooling delivered solely in SAE, this is a significantly complex undertaking.

The guide is a procedural text. It is concerned with providing direction about how students need to act. It does so by mapping relations between "understanding and application" and evaluative grades on an A-E scale. The oft-used imperative command in the Theme position is the clue: *identifies, demonstrates, interprets, makes (judgements/statements), recalls, offers, recognises, states and shows*. It is not a simple prospective procedural text like a (Western) recipe or science experiment, neither does the staging nor spatial design mark it as such. Unlike simple procedural texts where the pedagogic relationship is prospective, personal and here and now (Martin & Rose, 2008), this

text is prospective in its purpose, but retrospective in that it explicates what students should have done as they responded to written tasks, is not personal in that it does not speak directly to the student without teacher mediation, and the imperatives do not follow each other in time. There are a number of points that can be made here.

Acting upon the commands of the text is delayed until the entire guide is discussed. The imperatives listed in each column are not presented in the sequence they will be undertaken; rather, ordering relates to the assigning of grades of A-E, with the most desirable response at the top and less desirable responses at the bottom. This is in keeping with a traditional Western orthodoxy for reading printed text and alphabetical order. Yet, in direct contrast to this top-down left-to-right orthodoxy, are symbolic gestures (arrows) that start at the bottom and move to the top. The dilemma is finding the least complicated reading trajectory that does not compromise meaning making for the students.

Subsumed within this text are choices for the student. The choices relate to the relations between "understanding and application" and evaluative grades on an A-E scale. These choices, ironically, restrict demonstrations of knowing and understanding, rather than enabling. Martin and Rose (2008, p. 192) term texts that offer choices as "conditional procedures" and note that they are "very complex".

This procedural text does not function in clearly articulated and discrete sequences or methods for action, as might be expected of a procedural text. Quite simply, how the imperatives are actioned is invisible. More practical examples are given in the "Sample Response" guide (QSA, 2008c) made available to teachers, but this is not part of the text for scaffolding students' understandings of the guide to making judgments.

An analysis of the language highlights its serious academic nature, particularly the prevalence of nominalisations. Nominalisation is the process whereby a verb or adjective is turned into a noun thereby making the text not only more compact but also more formal (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). For example, the verb "to judge" becomes the noun "judgement". Other examples of nominalised word forms from the guide include: *application, understanding, messaging (in messaging), knowledge, opinion, precision, written, verbal, control (strong language control), sequenced (a sequenced thank you message), effectiveness, appeal (audience appeal) and raised (raised awareness)*. However, nominalised word forms are not easy to comprehend. Halliday (1985) purports that even older children cannot understand nominalisation. This is because what is required by the imperative is not easily discernable. It is no easier when the verb and noun form of a word have the same presentation. An example of this is the

verb "control" (which is not used in this guide) vis-a-vis the noun "control" (strong language control).

The guide has a specialised function in education and requires esoteric knowledge to be understood and acted upon. The instruction to explain its intent "in student-friendly terms" is to recontextualise the specialised practice of teacher evaluation into pedagogic content for students. A teacher would need to offer a lot of mediation to transmit such understandings, yet the time allocated to the first task of "Setting the Scene" and the "Guide to Making Judgment" is "approximately 15 minutes" in total (see QSA, 2008b, p. 9).

In terms of learning theory, the upward pointing arrows suggest that demonstrations of learning are simply developmental. The content of the guide suggests that there is a proper and preordained way of demonstrating learning. It presupposes that there is a defined answer. In his discussion on the epistemic base of teaching and learning for Indigenous students in New South Wales, Harrison (2007, p. 3) lamented that learning in one's own way:

> is an impossibility when the aims, outcomes and marking criteria are established before the kids walk into the classroom. Many students know only too well that there is an answer there and they need to know what it is before they can participate in the classroom. They know that there is an answer there already there in the mind of the teacher … that prior knowledge is stored and passed on to learners in its original form.

Such sentiments clearly translate to this (subject) English QCAT.

■ Product 1: Assembly message

The next task requires the teacher to role play a speaker on assembly and deliver a message about Emily's lost puppy (QSA, 2008b, p. 11). The message, below, is read once, after which students are assisted with reading five previously unseen comprehension questions that they must answer in their student books (QSA, 2008a, p. 4). The same "assembly" message is read again. This time students answer a new set of previously unseen questions in their student workbooks (QSA, 2008a, pp. 6-7).

> Good morning students. Today I will begin our assembly with an important announcement. This morning, Emily from 4G came to my office very upset, and asked me to make an announcement about her missing pet puppy, Rusty. Rusty has been missing since last night. Before school, Emily and her family searched for her pet all around her home, her backyard and around her street. Rusty is three months

old. He has fluffy, brown fur and black eyes. He is wearing a red collar with his name and Emily's telephone number on it. As Emily lives close to the school, she is hoping that Rusty may have wandered into the school grounds. If you think you have seen Rusty, please come to the front of the assembly before you return to class. Please keep a look out for Rusty. If you see a puppy matching his description tell Emily or let someone at the office know. Now we will move to the next message.

Again, there is slippage in the comparability of the culture embedded in the text and the way of doing things at Tortol Island.

Emily's ownership of the puppy is reinforced in the message delivered on assembly with references to *her missing puppy*, *her pet* and *Emily's telephone number*. The questions also use the following references for the puppy: *Emily's puppy*, *her pet puppy* and *Emily's pet*. The use of a red collar with Rusty's name and Emily's phone number (to mark the puppy as belonging to Emily) is not part of the culture of having a pet at Tortol Island.

The gravity of separation of dam and puppy is reinforced further by the disclosure that the puppy is only three months old.

Referral to Emily's place within the school, as being from *4G* (Year 4 and sub-group G), introduces a student classification system not in use at Tortol Island Campus. In terms of the significant textual features, the assembly message is a highly complex text. It evidences multiple genres, including factual recount (*Emily coming to office and Emily's family looking for Rusty*), description (*of Rusty*), procedure (*instructions if you think you have seen Rusty*), as well as orientation to the assembly and re-orientation to the next assembly item. Linguistically speaking, this text also evidences the highly complex resource of nominalisation where the word *announcement*, built from the verb "announce", is used twice. Moreover, each use of *announcement* occurs in a built up nominal (noun) group (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004): *an important announcement; an announcement about her missing pet puppy, Rusty*.

In the booklet designed to help teachers make overall judgements (QSA, 2008c), sample A to E grade responses from students are detailed. In relation to the question that asks "If someone found a puppy how could they be certain it was Emily's puppy?", a response that nominates the red collar with the name on it is graded as an A or B, whereas, mentioning the colour of fur is graded as a C response. According to this judgment, signifiers that relate most strongly to the students' culture of having a pet cannot be awarded a grade higher than a C. Whilst the teachers' guidelines tell the teacher to "instruct students to

read all questions carefully" (QSA, 2008b, p. 10), no amount of careful reading will compensate for cultural incomparability. Thus *comparability* of this assessment task with the students' culture and its judgements for showcasing the students' knowledge and understanding is compromised.

■ Product 2: Noticeboard message

In the scenario, Emily has still not found her pet, so she decides to check the school noticeboard for lost and found items. There is no notice about Rusty, so Emily wrote a message for the noticeboard. For copyright reasons, the stimulus text cannot be reproduced here. It consists of some wording followed by an arrow down to a child's drawing of an unhappy face with tears streaming down the cheeks. The title is written in big bold capital letters, followed by five exclamation marks: "LOST!!!!!". The written text is as follows (QSA, 2008a p. 8):

My beautiful pet puppy, Rusty!

He went missing last night and I have looked everywhere!

Now I am very, very lonely!

If you see my baby Rusty, please find me or ring my home 3412 3478.

Please, please I'm desperate!

This is me.

Four points of slippage need to be considered.

The medium of communication is in itself a point of consideration. Shnukal (2002, p. 10) confirms: "[w]riting is rarely anybody's first choice as medium of communication". Island culture is still predominantly oral and all important knowledge is transmitted orally and in context. As Shnukal (2003, p. 52) aptly points out, school learning tasks are generally the only context in which students are expected to understand, speak and write English. This cultural mismatch creates a voice of non-being for the Torres Strait Islander.

The invisibility of authorship is problematic. The noticeboard makes reference to "*I* have looked", "*I* am very, very lonely", "please find *me*", "please, I'm desperate" and "This is *me*", but at no point is the author of the notice identified. The prevalence of "I/me" participants over "Rusty/he" participants also sends the message Emily's actions and state of being are more significant than Rusty's. Readers learn about Emily's actions (*looked everywhere*) and on three occasions her state of being (*am very very lonely, am desperate, This is me*). Readers are only told that Rusty is lost (*went missing*) and he is owned (*my beautiful pet puppy, my baby*).

Two other philosophical themes are more visible in this text: commodification and anthropomorphism of the social relationship between a puppy and its human owner. The commodification shows through in [i] statements of Emily's ownership (*my beautiful pet puppy, my baby*) and [ii] the puppy's service role (presence keeps loneliness at bay). The anthropomorphism (in the form of *baby* Rusty and as company for humans) is, in effect, a statement of human superiority – everything else must be human-like by behaving as such. Both practices are constructed as so ordinary that students who are concerned with the ethical implications of humans separating puppies from their dam and litter, exercising power and control over the puppies through ownership and believing their purpose is to serve humans will find it difficult to identify Emily's feelings (Question 4), strategies for drawing the attention of readers (Question 5) and suggestions for making Emily's message more helpful to readers (Question 6).

■ Product 3: Thank-you message

Page 10 of the student workbook (QSA, 2008a) explains that when Emily arrived home from school, she found a note from her teacher. The note read (QSA, 2008a, p. 10):

Hi Emily,

I found a puppy hiding in the school car park and I knew he was yours!!

I came to your house but no-one was there!

I've taken Rusty home and I'll give him a bed and some food.

Can someone give me a ring on 38211793?
Mrs Daniels

The family collected Rusty from Mrs Daniels. Students are then directed to "[w]rite a thank-you message to Mrs Daniels that explains why Emily is so grateful" (QSA, 2008a, p. 10). Teachers are told to encourage students to "write in full sentences and use your best spelling and punctuation" (QSA, 2008a, p. 11).

Again, comparability with culture is an important comparison, particularly that related to the medium of communication (written) for a social response. As already stated, Shnukal (2002, p. 10) confirms: "[w]riting is rarely anybody's first choice as a medium of communication". Island culture, for this type of transactional interaction, would be oral. The only form of cultural expression that is sanctioned belongs in mainstream white Western discourse. Differences outside of this are tamed by the boundaries of the task and in the guide to making judgements.

The problem is that written text is not spoken text written down. Each differs in their choice of words (lexical choice) and clause structure (grammatical choice). "Typically, written language becomes complex by being lexically dense: it packs a large number of lexical items into each clause; whereas spoken language becomes complex by being grammatically intricate: it builds up elaborate clause complexes..." (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 654). To take what would be typically a spoken text and produce its sentiments via a written artefact requires significant cultural and language translation.

Comparability with context also needs consideration. At Tortol Island Campus, there is no school car park; no teachers drive to school, as no teachers have a car on Tortol Island, and parents who do have a car drop the students off on the side of the track.

There is also slippage that should be of concern for all teachers in general, not just the teachers on Tortol Island. There is slippage between what the task explicitly requires of the students (write a thank-you message to Mrs Daniels that explains why Emily is so grateful) and what needs to be evidenced for students to achieve higher ratings. By way of example, the "Sample Response" (QSA, 2008c) suggests that an A response evidences "some creativity" by "offering to bring Rusty to visit Mrs Daniels and suggesting a way to keep him safe" whereas a B response "expresses gratitude with an offer to help at school". A C response evidences "gratitude shown in giving thanks to Mrs Daniels". Neither the instruction (above) nor the *Guide to Making Judgments* (QSA, 2008a, p. 13) criteria sheet detail "offers" any "suggestions for keeping Rusty safe" as part of the response text. Only students who can guess what is in the marker's head can be rewarded with grades higher than a C. A student who only produces the typical "thank-you" transactional text cannot be awarded a grade higher than a C. The suggested responses put forward for grades of A and B have made this transaction text into something else than was indicated in the instructions.

■ The collateral effects for Tortol Island students

The focus of this paper is on the interface of one systemic common assessment with *Maganiu Mala Kes Buai* ways of knowing and their transactional texts. This is not to dismiss the value of common assessment tasks, particularly the act of involving teachers in moderated assessment. There is value and usefulness in such an approach. My concerns are not focused on the appropriateness of SAE in Indigenous communities, rather how learning outcomes for (subject) English are represented through a QCAT. This final section returns to the description of the purposes of QCATs and considers the rhetoric of *comparability*. In summary, it has proved instructive to consider how the underpinning principles of mainstream culture

appear to have been normalised and hidden, and have become visible only by critique.

As stated earlier, QSA (2009) describe QCATs as "authentic assessment that involves a meaningful problem, emphasises critical thinking and reasoning, provides students with every opportunity to do their best work and promotes fairness and equity". This (subject) English assessment is not benign; it is an assessment of *Kole* ways of doing. There is no cultural sensitivity, cultural relevance or local context in the development of the assessment task. Inequality is the result when an assessment task is founded on the (mis)assumption that language choices and texts choices are culturally neutral structures. My points of reference are not founded on the disparate ways of interpreting the text (for this was not my focus); rather I'm talking about a different cultural inheritance that confirms particular relational positions. It is not a simple matter of "using child friendly terms" (QSA, 2008b, p. 9), "assist[ing] students with reading the questions" (QSA, 2008b, page 10) or "rephrasing the question" (QSA, 2008b, p. 12). Something entirely different is required if the assessment is to be fair.

Moreover, the analysis evidences how *Maganiu Mala Kes Buai* ways of knowing and their texts must be forsaken and replaced with mainstream examples. This effectively ignores the literacy practices of these students, seeking to supplant them with mainstream Western cultural practices and their underpinning ideologies. My fear with implementing this QCAT is we will have no choice but to label these students as deficient and in need of remedial efforts. Discourses that punish cultural difference can so easily dismiss *Maganiu Mala Kes Buai* people from mainstream education and continually recast them into the margins.

Nakata (2003, p. 10) appropriately points out that "English literacy and understanding the world beyond our communities, beyond our local and cultural context, is as critically important for our future survival as understanding our traditional pathways", but the point I make is that the damage is done when students and their teachers are publically labelled through standardised assessment. This QCAT contributes to the way these students will see themselves. The students on Tortol Island are marginalised from their right to perform effectively on assessment. Echoing Nakata's (1997, p. 11) lament, it is ironic and most frustrating that the very education system that Torres Strait Islanders have tried so hard to access should fail them, and continue to condemn them to lower outcomes. Tripcony's (2002) earlier study of assessment practices and their efficacy for Indigenous communities found widespread discrimination against Indigenous students on the basis of cultural content and requisite language forms. This pattern of irrelevance and disempowerment

should not be allowed to continue. The tasks for Torres Strait Islander students need to be adapted to fit *Maganiu Mala Kes Buai* ways, and not the other way around.

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