Montessori

Working in remote Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia
Torres Strait Islands

Aboriginal lands
Physical evidence of occupation 2,500 years ago.

40,000-60,000 years of occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settled from Papua New Guinea</th>
<th>Settled via land bridge from SE Asia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village based fishing and cropping economies</td>
<td>Hunter-gatherer economies - seasonal movement through estates</td>
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<tr>
<td>First contacts with Europeans though trading from mid-late 1800s</td>
<td>Spread of European colonies from 1788 decimates aboriginal populations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact with missionaries before colonisation – Christianity embraced early &amp; enthusiastically.</td>
<td>Missions often established to protect survivors.</td>
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</table>
If I can’t see you, you’re not there
I was supremely fortunate to come from a family that didn’t share those views. We were encouraged to think independently, even radically, although at a later date there might have been regrets.

In any case, my first foray into political activism was to organise a sit in at the school fete to protest the Vietnam war. It was the beginning of a long commitment to fighting for social justice that eventually brought me, via a very circuitous route, to Montessori.

I began teaching in a public secondary school in 1978 in the most conservative state in Australia, governed by a coalition of rednecks who managed to win elections with sometimes as little as 18% of the vote. Unsurprisingly perhaps, my request to teach in an Aboriginal community was declined.

After 15 years teaching and a change of government, I worked for the Education department in social justice policy for 10 years, followed by another 7 years as an independent education consultant with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

And that experience led me to an believe that if we wanted to change educational outcomes for Indigenous children, we needed to start work before they started school.

My Montessori story

I want to acknowledge the warmth, trust and generosity of spirit that have been extended to me first by Megan and Christine, and then by many in the Montessori community in Australia and elsewhere.
Colonisation/Invasion

1788 – soldiers & convicts

1824 – soldiers & convicts

1829 - free settlers

1835 - free settlers

1837 - free settlers

1869 - free settlers

Torres Strait 1871 – missionaries; Qld annexed 1877

Cape York 1863 – cattle-grazers, gold miners

1824 – soldiers & convicts

1788 – soldiers & convicts

1824 – soldiers & convicts
“Civilising the natives”
- Development of reserves, missions and boards of “protection”
- Loss of legal rights to control of property, wages, family decision-making
- Children separated from parents on many missions
- Forced removal of “half-caste” children (Stolen Generations)
On missions, traditional cultural practices and language often cruelly “discouraged” in favour of European manners and Christianity
In rural areas, Aboriginal men and women worked on pastoral properties, often for slave wages.
In towns and cities, Aboriginal people become fringe dwellers.
The Torres Strait Islands
Missions and missionaries
The colonial legacy

1901

- Federation & a new Constitution:
  - "in reckoning the numbers of people... Aboriginal natives shall not be counted".
  - Power over Aboriginal Affairs is left with the states; in some, significant numbers of Aborigines stripped of all legal rights.

By 1920

- Aboriginal population is estimated to be at its lowest at 60,000 - 70,000.
- Widely believed to be a 'dying race'.
1937

Assimilation policy

- Commonwealth and State Authorities decide:
  - Aboriginal people of mixed descent are to be assimilated into white society
  - All others to stay on reserves.

"The destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption... with a view to their taking their place in the white community on an equal footing with the whites."
1930s-70s

Segregationist practices thrive until the 60s

- Separate sections in theatres
- Separate wards in hospitals
- Hotels able to refuse to serve indigenous people
- Schools able to refuse enrolment to aboriginal children.
1965

- Integration policy is introduced, supposedly to give Aboriginal people more control over their lives and society.

- Northern Territory patrol officers 'bring in' the last group of Aboriginal people - the Pintubi people - living independently in the desert. They are relocated to Papunya and Yuendumu, about 300 kms north-west of Alice Springs.
1967 Referendum

- Gave the federal government the right to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the population census

- Gave the federal government the right to legislate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
Aboriginal resistance & non-Aboriginal support

- Walk-offs from reserves, strikes on cattle stations
- 1937 Aborigines Progressive Association
- 1957 Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI)
- 1965 Freedom Rides
- 1972 Tent Embassy (land rights campaign)
- 2010 Apology to the Stolen Generations
Freedom Riders, 1965
2010

Apology to the Stolen Generations
Why do we need to understand history and culture?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 2015
- Life expectancy 10 years lower
- Babies twice as likely to be of low birth weight
- Over 33% under 16 (gen population 20%)
- Under 4% over 65 (general population 14%)
- Impact of alcohol, petrol sniffing and drugs
- Child abuse
- Domestic violence
• Significantly higher rates of renal disease, cardiovascular disease (twice as high) & diabetes (three times as high)
• Four times the rate of teenage births
• Twice as likely to be victims of physical assault
• Twice the national rate of suicide; youth suicide rate even higher.
• 46.2% employment vs 76.2% non-Indigenous employment
• 2.7% of the population but up 27% of the prison population
Hand in Hand

Making change

learn

teach

learn

teach
Head, heart & hand

Knowledge, storytelling, analysis, research, discussion to deepen mutual understandings

Empathy, humility, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity

Practical skills, and opportunities to put skills into practice
MCF remote community programs

- Aurukun
- Kiwirrkurra
- Torres Strait
- Lockhart River
The Torres Strait
Culture is strong
2009 AEDI outcomes

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<th>Vulnerable in one or more areas</th>
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<td>National average</td>
<td>Torres Strait average</td>
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<tr>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
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What we did

- Committed to long term action
- Committed to quality – training, mentoring
- Committed to sustainability – to “growing our own”
- Responded to the community
- Began slowly and kept going
- Monitored, evaluated, reflected, admitted mistakes and made changes
An informed decision
Key partners

Tagai State College supported Montessori programs for children aged 3-6 & 6-9
Torres Strait Islanders’ Regional Education Council to provide birth to age 3 programs
Guiding Principles

- Building a foundation of trust
- Fostering independence in children - and adults
  - Help me to do it myself
- Long-term commitment
- Sustainability
- Community engagement around the child
Transformational experiences 3-6
What 3-6 parents said

- She’s been able to follow her preferences and focus on what she enjoys; I can really see the difference it’s made to her.

- He’s so much more willing to learn, and very confident – much more than my other children were.

- She’s got all the language on what she learns at school – she’s 6 and she’s talking to me about isosceles and equilateral triangles.

- He learns faster, and he wants to go to school much more than my older one.

- I like the way the children respect the materials, and the way they work at their own pace and level in maths and reading.
The Strait Start programs – birth to 3
A partnership with families

- Parents and carers develop a clear understanding of the critical roles they play in children’s learning.
- They learn concrete ways to continue to foster their children’s development.
- They support their children to experience continued educational success.
emotional development – identity
She’s so independent now, she wants to do things on her own.

He asks every day to go to Strait Start.

She knows her colours, she can hold a pencil properly, and she does a lot of writing and colouring.

It’s really good for her. She likes the books, and she always wants to read at home. She is quiet and calm at Strait Start.

I used to do everything for them – I didn’t want them to make a mess. But now I let them do things themselves; now I know that’s how they learn.

I learn new things here, then try to do them at home and show them to my other children. I read at home with all the children now; we borrow books from the library every week.
In 2015

- 10 early years programs for children from birth to $3^{1/2}$
- 2 Montessori long-day care centres
- 10 Torres Strait Islanders trained in 0-3
- New 0-3 cohort about to commence training
- 2 pre-prep/prep classes ($3^{1/2}$-$5^{1/2}$)
- 2 Torres Strait teachers trained in 3-6
- A 5 year Strategic Plan for expansion of programs across all islands
### AEDI Outcomes Torres Strait

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<tr>
<td>59.9%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>35.5%</td>
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TSIREC attributes this success to a **renewed focus on early childhood development and education** in recent years.
Montessori Nation

- 2014
- Inaugural Summit on Montessori in the Torres Strait
- Senior representatives from every island
- International visitors
- A showcase of programs and progress
- Launch of Torres Strait Aid to Life
School holiday program, Aurukun
Kiwirrkurra
The Ngaanyatjarra Lands
1984
Lockhart River
Key Partner

- Puuya Foundation
- Denise Hagan CEO
- Board comprised mainly of senior Lockhart women
- 13 years committed to supporting Lockhart women and men to build the capacity to make their community safe, happy and sustainable.
- A visit to the Torres Strait last year for the inaugural Montessori in the Torres Strait Summit convinced them to partner with us.
Establishing, maintaining, supporting & growing our work

- What makes a difference?
  - Community engagement - particularly complex in Indigenous settings
  - Slow delicate work of building trust, relationships and shared understanding and commitment
  - Working towards sustainability through training and mentoring and government engagement
Kaziw Mudh official opening
With the Federal Minister for Education
The heart of the matter

- Relationships
  - Between partners - the insiders and the outsiders, the organisations and the community
  - Between parents and children
  - Between teachers and parents

- Capacity
  - Recruitment
  - Training
  - Mentoring

- Time
  - Time (and timing) is everything
  - Long-term relationships allow for understandings to change, grow and deepen
  - Slow the pace; otherwise, build on shaky ground...
Triumphs

- Successful long-standing programs in some communities
- Clear positive impact on children’s well-being
- Impact on parents and community
- Strong family/community support
- Strong bonds & long-term relationships
- Partnerships - government and community
Challenges

- Legacies of history
- Differences between communities
- Remoteness and isolation
- Recruiting teachers
- Keeping teachers happy
- Supporting teachers
- Training
- Politics – national, state, school, community
Where to from here?

- Hope and conviction reside in:
  - The outcomes we have already seen
  - Our determination to try, to learn, and to try again
  - Our passion for social justice and for working in good faith
  - The long-term nature of our commitment
  - Deepening understandings of what the “prepared adult” means in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
The prepared adult

A final suggestion to those who want to work in communities – **examine your motives**.

- Don’t go to find yourself or heal yourself.
- Don’t go to get back to nature and to connect with the spirit of the land.
- Don’t go as a messiah or a saviour.
- Don’t go expecting to be loved.
- Go knowing the value of human dignity.
- Go to serve children and their families.
- Go having prepared yourself to be of service.