



## In the Horse or On It

Presentation given at the 2005 International Montessori Congress, 14-17 July 2005, Sydney Australia

### Don Anderson

Don Anderson holds the position of Director, Western Cape College, in Far North Queensland, and is quintessentially Australian! Don could have stayed on the cane farm on which he was born but instead has spent the last 45 years in Queensland State schools as a pupil, teacher, principal, administrator and now Director; always as an advocate, and often as the instigator of insightful change. Don's career focus has been within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, and whilst physically remote, his work is very central in significance. Don's contact with Montessori was pragmatic and remains so. He believes the Montessori approach can extend life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on Cape York.



Don Anderson was unable to attend the Congress. His paper was presented by Ian Mackie.

### Ian Mackie

Ian Mackie is currently Head of Campus Aurukun of Western Cape College in Queensland. His day-to-day operational role is negotiation and engagement with community and other agencies to dramatically improve educational and life opportunities for and with the people of Aurukun. He is working to improve school transitions, attendance and leadership and to foster community engagement so that attitudes and behaviours change so that children will learn to "want" – to aspire. Highlights of his career include President of Queensland Teachers Union; Vice President Australian Education Union; Delegate to World Assemblies of Teachers; and Principal Policy Advisor Indigenous Education Queensland.



A few years ago I had a telephone call from Megan Tyne who suggested I should talk to David Kahn because the Association of Montessori Internationale was keen to support Indigenous Education. At that stage I didn't know Megan well but had this hunch Megan was the sort of person that made things happen. I've since had this confirmed.

Since that time we've seen the collapse of Communism, Nelson Mandela set free, the end of the Vietnam War and September 11.

I see only one struggle left – how does a large public education system work sustainably with Montessorians? About this I have a vision. A romantic vision would have a metaphorical Trojan horse filled with Montessorians who infiltrate the big Troyonian bureaucracy, open the floodgates, and bring in the troops – blocks and all. David on the Charger, with Megan ensuring all the troops were fully armed and a contingency tied in the corner of the handkerchief probably a missile.

This strategy might work, but I've noted Montessorians' passion and belief is for children, creating a stink is not your default position. Gestation in a horse's belly appears more of a dreamy abstraction than appropriate.

I believe it is possible to ride horses straight through the gates into public education and bypass the dreamy-abstraction gestation. There are challenges though, sometimes the front gate may not be available or suitable. Sometimes the gates could be the C.O.D. style – needing carrying or dragging,

others a bit of lever and jemmy. I wish to elaborate on these gates based on real experience from Cairns in north Queensland Australia.

For the last four years a Montessori program has operated in the Cairns West State School with financial support from the Masterman Montessori bequest, Association of Montessori International and Education Queensland.

Education Queensland operates on a simple strategy: students of an appropriate age exist, they are enrolled and for every twenty or so a teacher appears. The school then collects an allocation of money to maintain facilities, teaching material and professionally extend staff. This we put into facilities - we know as schools.

At Cairns West, the Montessori Masterman bequest provided money for materials and extending the enrolled age group. Association Montessori International provided training for teachers. Education Queensland provided core staffing and buildings.

The traditional program for students turning five in the calendar year was extended to embrace three and four year old and the Montessori pedagogy was delivered. This has had its hiccups but has been successful and created a runner that will be harder to remove than nutgrass.

In Western Cape York, we have parallel opportunity. At Aurukun we have a program in a brilliant new facility for youth from six months to six year old. Montessorians are welcome. In Weipa a range of organisations exist and provide childcare to structured programs. No Montessori program exists. In Napranum, Crèche and Kindergarten provide the programs up until our EQ year one. Crèche and Kindergarten tell me they have Montessori programs in other parts of Queensland and are ready to talk.

In Mapoon we are building new classrooms and plan to have programs for infants. The gate is open in Mapoon.

I have an understanding of the rigor of Montessori Education. I understand there are principles and strategies you will not compromise. I celebrate this. I believe Indigenous Education has suffered dramatically as a consequence of low expectations and lack of rigor focusing on experiments, dreamy abstractions and distractions.

This does provide a challenge as adoption may be required to operate within a state system.

Is this too high a price to pay?

I am too biased to provide this answer but I would like to present a bit of information about my working environment that I think will connect.

Five years ago I was appointed to the role of Group Principal, Cape York. The student outcomes from Cape schools reflected the overall disastrous decline in literacy and numeracy outcomes for remote Indigenous students throughout Australia over the past thirty years. In viewing this landscape of failure it was decided that the focus of my work would be on the development of Western Cape College. The College was to encompass the original schools of Aurukun (P-10), Mapoon (P-6), Napranum (1-6) and Weipa State School (P-12).

I wrote at that time:

*Education outcomes on Cape York, for remote indigenous people, reflected the decline in education outcomes experienced by remote Indigenous communities across Australia since the early 1970s.*

*The obvious and painful fact of older indigenous people displaying levels of literacy and numeracy that puts current outcomes for their grandchildren to shame is one of the most disturbing elements of the Indigenous education debate.*

*Failure to take account of this obvious fact, that success has been achieved in the past, has led to a constant focus on the social decline of indigenous remote communities as an excuse for failure in education.*

*At the same time there has been an over emphasis on pedagogy as the panacea for all success. The belief that “we are just about to turn the corner” focuses attention on potential future success while avoiding the current failure.*

*These rationales have avoided the reality that education on Cape York and elsewhere has failed the vast majority of indigenous students including those who have and do attend regularly. In effect the constant focus on outcomes as distracted from the accountability to provide excellence in educational delivery for those students who do attend. They have enthusiasm towards their role but quickly adopt an understanding that success for students is not possible in terms comparable to urban schools. Idealism and energy give way to a belief that it is important to be a cohesive and happy teaching team. In effect, survive the experience, in the best manner possible.*

*The irony that Aurukun parents, who have some of the worst education outcomes for their children in the state, are reported by QSE as among the best satisfied draws us back to the failure of all concerned, to face the real situation. The very existence of this survey material reflects a culture that lacks critical awareness. That the survey is patently flawed is unquestioned, therefore begging a much more important question.*

*Education on Cape York has, over the past 30 years, become an industry of failure, consuming vast amounts of resources for diminishing education outcomes. Despite much educational research and a number of State and Federal government reports the decline in outcomes has continued.*

*Western Cape College intends to change this industry of failure into an example of best educational practice by addressing the assumptions that lie at the heart of the education failure.*

The landscape has dramatically changed over these few years we are in new environment new gates have been built and old ones opened.

I quote our Minister for Education and the Arts, Anna Bligh MP from our Partners for Success Strategy:

*“All children deserve access to a quality education which will equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their future lives. However, for too long Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have performed at lower levels than non-Indigenous students. This is clearly not good enough and the Government in partnership with parents, teachers and communities must do better for these children.*

*Currently there are about 29,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland state schools. These children represent more than six per cent of all state school students.*

*We have a responsibility to give these students every opportunity to reach their full potential....*



*Our key priorities are to improve student attendance, retention and literacy. We want to see more students at school, more often and for longer. Challenging, yet achievable targets have been set for each priority area. We cannot reach these targets without the support and involvement of parents and local communities. Partnerships are the key to delivering better outcomes for Indigenous students."*

From the same strategy, The Director-General for Education, Ken Smith adds:

*"Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a major priority for Education Queensland. Our goal is to ensure that all students in Queensland have access to a quality education that prepares and nurtures them for the challenges of the future.*

*With this goal in mind, Education Queensland is committed to working in partnership with Indigenous communities, other government agencies and the private and community sectors to effect positive and lasting improvement in the quality of life experienced by Indigenous people across the state.*

*Improving Indigenous education outcomes will require commitment across the entire state schooling sector. It will involve thinking differently about how we work with Indigenous students and colleagues. It will also require the smarter use of resources to ensure maximum impact and benefit."*

Over the last few years under the Smart State and Partners for Success Strategies, Education Queensland can be proud of its achievements. From admittedly low benchmarks, and attention to data, high expectations, curriculum renewal and staffing strategies sustainable improvement has occurred for Indigenous students past six years old.

In November 2004 Western Cape College was recognised by the Queensland Education Department as a "Centre for Excellence in the Provision of Indigenous Education" The work of changing a culture of failure to one of success is possible.

I am a pragmatic person about all this I would not be here if I had a better alternative to addressing what I see as a void prior to compulsory schooling.

I am not sure a suitable gate even exists for a non compromised Montessori approach in the compulsory years, and I am not advocating for one, I am proud of our New Basics curriculum framework. We are also currently introducing a prep year across the state.

The need in my mind as an encrusted public servant is prior to this stage - but you could fit in a horse and you may find gates.

I should feel uncomfortable being so blunt. I am making a request for a Rolls Royce but demanding the colour and timing of delivery. A get-lost response may be appropriate, but all Australians have an accountability to address the socio-economic circumstances that have been generated by welfare dependency. The answer is education and that never starts too early.

Australians know what a fair go is and welfare dependency and a life expectancy of 48 years are not fair or economically rational.

My engagement with Montessorians has convinced me what you have made work for the rest of the world just may be part of the answer in the part of Australia I call home.

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