



## Integrating Traditional Wisdom within Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By **Linda Burney**

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*She is a member of the Wiradjuri nation of Australia. She was the first Aboriginal person to gain a Diploma of Teaching at what is now known as the Bathurst campus of Charles Sturt University.*

*She began a career in teaching but soon moved into the area of policy. Linda was instrumental in developing (and later reworking) the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy - the first of its kind in Australia - which is now mandatory in all schools in NSW.*

*Linda was the elected President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group - an influential community-based advisory body - for ten years, during which time she also participated in a number of boards and committees dealing with education and Indigenous issues.*

*Linda has represented Aboriginal education at the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations. She has been a board member of a wide range of influential Australian organisations including the multicultural broadcaster, SBS, the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training, the Historic Houses Trust, the Centenary of Federation Council, the Anti-Discrimination Board, the University of Canberra Council and the Sydney Institute Council of NSW TAFE.*

*Linda has an active involvement with the reconciliation movement in Australia. She was appointed to the national Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1994, and was founding Chair of the NSW State Reconciliation Committee.*

*She helped organise the famous 'Peoples Walk for Reconciliation' in 2000, in which over a quarter of a million Australians walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge to demonstrate their support for a better relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.*

*Linda has received a range of awards including the 1993 Department of School Education Director-General's Award for Outstanding Service to Public Schools; the NSW TAFE Medal in 1995; and the Lipton's Australian Women's Quality of Life Award in 1996.*



Let me begin my presentation today by paying respect to my elders - both living and passed - for their wisdom, bravery, and strength in keeping our culture alive despite the brutality they endured and the attempts that have been made to destroy the very fabric of Aboriginal existence in my country. It is important to remind ourselves that the story of most countries is one that often involves examples of man's inhumanity to man and of the subjugation of the original peoples by an invading force.

Can I also pay my respect and say thank you to the International Montessori movement. In particular, to the organisers of this 24th International Congress for the very great honour you have bestowed on me by inviting me to share with you all my thoughts on the integration of traditional wisdom within the educational context of the 21st century.

I can only do this from my own worldview. I am an Indigenous woman from Australia. I am a member of the Wiradjuri nation. My country covers a wide sweep of south-western New South Wales, one of the eastern States of Australia. NSW is the most populated of the eight States and Territories. You will have all heard of the capital of NSW because of the Olympic Games last year. Sydney is where I now live.

I come from a country whose history is drenched in the suffering of Indigenous peoples. The Australian story from our worldview is a story of dispossession, destruction and theft - theft of culture, lifestyle, language, pride, country and, most tragically of all, children.

The Wiradjuri were the first inland nation to feel the brutality of British occupation. The Wiradjuri wars are an untold story in Australia. They raged for a long time over a wide area. The first Wiradjuri resistance was led by Windradyne - a genuine Australian hero so few know about. The resort to martial law in Bathurst in 1823 indicates the strength of the Wiradjuri resistance. The price the Wiradjuri paid is beyond words. Some of the most brutal recorded massacres in the colony's history happened to my ancestors.

Invasion and colonisation are recent events in the story of Australia. It began in 1788 - just 213 years ago. It wasn't until 1992 that the High Court of Australia, in what has become known as the Mabo Case, recognised that Aboriginal people were in Australia at the time of colonisation and could have continuing rights to land. For the first time the common law of my country recognised Aboriginal customary law and, through that, Native Title rights. The Federal Government and a number of State and Territory legislatures have since wound back elements of the 1993 Native Title legislation.

This is an important point as other nations with a similar experience to Australia, such as Canada, the United States and New Zealand, have all had many years of law-making around land and resource issues with their Indigenous populations. There were formal treaties signed during the colonisation process. This was not the case in Australia.

It was the Mabo decision that formally recognised Aboriginal peoples' existence at the time of invasion and finally overturned the doctrine of Terra Nullius or 'land belonging to no one'. So whilst the countries I have mentioned have had hundreds of years of law-making on these issues, Australia has had less than a decade.

There are two groups of Indigenous people in Australia: there are Aboriginal peoples who occupied the mainland including the island State of Tasmania; and there are also the Torres Strait Islanders. The Torres Strait lies between the tip of Queensland and Papua New Guinea. It is a collection of islands in the Melanesian region of the Pacific. The colonisation of this area, like much of the Pacific, was through religion. Missionaries of various denominations brought Christianity to the islands of the Torres Strait. Its legacy has been enduring.

Eddie Mabo was from Mer, the place of the first successful Native Title claim in 1992. Many Torres Strait Islanders now live on the mainland, particularly in Queensland. The Torres Strait Islanders have recently been granted a form of regional autonomy. Many of the Government and non-government agencies' charters include both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, for example, ATSIC - the national elected body with prime responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, federally in Australia.

The resilience of Indigenous people is truly remarkable. Today we are still here, holding onto and building from what we still have. There is a famous Aboriginal mantra:

Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

I live in a country that is struggling to come to terms with its brutal past. This violent past is not just restricted to the relationship between black and white Australians - much of Anglo-Australia arrived in chains as convicts; men, women and children who suffered terrible brutality.

There has been a formal legislated 10-year Reconciliation process in Australia aimed at healing the wounds of the past between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The assessment of the success of this process depends where you sit in the debate. Many Aboriginal people would argue that it has delivered more for white Australia than it has changed the life chances or progressed the rights agenda for Aboriginal Australians.

Reconciliation has contributed to an improvement in the Australian public's understanding of the life chances of Indigenous people. However, I would argue that there has been little movement in advancing the rights agenda.

The notion of equity and 'fair-go', the cornerstone of the Australian ethos, is so far removed from the daily experience of Indigenous people in Australia that it becomes meaningless.

Australia is a country that calls itself young, yet has the precious gift of the oldest surviving culture on Earth and has not the capacity to see the gift this is.

True reconciliation between the Australian nation and Indigenous people is not achievable without the nation's acknowledgment of the dispossession, oppression and degradation of Aboriginal people in the past.

I want to explore the following points in the context of the theme 'Integrating Traditional Wisdom within Education in the 21st Century'. I will speak from an Aboriginal worldview. The concept of traditional wisdom for me is the knowledge, practices and traditions my people have carried out in our lore from the beginning of time.

There is archaeological evidence that Aboriginal people have been in Australia for over sixty five thousand years. Our Dreaming, or the time of creation, speaks of the beginning of time and the creation of the world and its laws, including the conduct and relationship of all the forms of life.

At the time of invasion, 213 years ago, there were around five hundred nation states in Australia - all with different customs and languages. The diversity of Aboriginal Australia then and now is astounding. A common theme of the concept is the earth as mother, the giver and protector of life. It is through this concept you begin to understand the notion of 'connection to country'.

My foundation point is that an Indigenous child should have an educational experience that provides them with outcomes that are equal to other students. It should equip them with confidence, a sense of civic responsibility, empathy and, most importantly, a sense of self worth and an educational experience which reinforces cultural identity.

Too often I have seen confident, bright Aboriginal children be entrusted to the educational system and within a few years - especially around the period of transition from primary school to secondary school - become alienated, exiting the school system way too early.

The integration of traditional wisdom into the educational experience of an Indigenous child is part of the answer to a satisfactory educational experience. However, it is not the whole answer.

To understand the whole we need to explore these basic points.

- Firstly, the importance of truth-telling within the school curriculum - whether it is at preschool or the senior secondary level. It must be appreciated that the ability of a country to own the truth about its past is fundamental to that country's future and the place the first peoples hold in that country.
- Secondly, the critical importance of not only access to education for all children but equity of outcomes from the educational experience. This issue is of huge importance to Aboriginal people. Education is one of the keys to addressing the shocking disadvantage experienced by the majority of the Aboriginal community.
- Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the opportunity for Aboriginal children to experience life choices and the chance to participate in society wrapped securely in the blanket of cultural identity - an identity that is valued and accepted by all people in that society.

These points are best captured by a much admired person in Australia, the outgoing Governor General, Sir William Deane.

'...There will be no true reconciliation until it can be seen that we are making real progress towards the position where the future prospects in terms of health, education, life expectancy, living conditions and self esteem of an Aboriginal baby are at least within the same area of discourse as the future prospects of a non Aboriginal baby. How can we hope to go forward as friends and equals while our children's hands cannot touch?'

One of the fundamental planks of Reconciliation, as Dr Alex Boraine, who was the Deputy Chair of the South African, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, describes it, is the art of truth-telling.

The art of truth-telling is something Australia has been very bad at. Even after a ten year legislated process of Reconciliation Australia still struggles to come to terms with a shameful history in terms of the first peoples.

I recount a personal story to emphasise this point.

I attended high school in a medium sized country town. I lived in one of the surrounding villages that fed this high school. I was the only Aboriginal child in my class and it was my first year of secondary school. I will never forget the shame, embarrassment and sense of worthlessness I felt as a result of how Aboriginal society was presented to my class.

We were taught that my people had no culture, no technology, were savages and the closest example to stone age man in existence today.

The best way I can explain the effects of such inadequate and racist curriculum is to describe growing up in a society that did not reflect me in its mirror. Aboriginal Australia's reflection was invisible or, at best, distorted.

Rick Farley, a well known commentator in Australia, in his essay, "What's the Alternative?" describes the importance of education this way:

"Acknowledging history is fundamental. Until a community has a common understanding of what has occurred in the past, there is no firm foundation for moving ahead together."

He outlines three important roles education plays.

1. It helps to counter ignorance and racism by presenting the facts.
2. It is a tool for equitable social justice outcomes for Indigenous children.
3. It is the mechanism for the education of the wider community about Indigenous history and culture.

I add to this list my founding principle that education is also responsible for the well-being and self-esteem of the child, including reinforcement of cultural identity.

To fully appreciate these points, I need to provide an overview of the notion of Aboriginal identity; a sense of the social justice circumstances of Aboriginal people in Australia and the impact history has had on our societies. I share the following perspectives with you so that you might understand a young Indigenous child's point of view what he or she must conquer to survive in the broadest context.

Aboriginality is not about the colour of your skin, the shape of your nose or the offensive past practice of blood content. Aboriginality is bound up with heritage, a shared history, connection to country, mother earth and family. For me, my identity is the most important aspect of my being. It is who I am and determines my place in the cosmos. Aboriginality is enduring and has survived every attempt to eradicate it.

Successive government policies of dispossession, extermination, protection (a misnamed policy if there ever was one) welfare, and assimilation - which finished in the early 1970's - have all had the insidious subplot of destroying Aboriginal identity and culture. Often it was the children that were the focus - none more so than under the policy of the forced removal of Aboriginal children. This activity that went on for several generations has created what is now known as the 'stolen generations'.

Essentially this was practice of removing, in the main, 'half caste' Aboriginal children from their families. It appears to have been the brainchild of the Commonwealth's chief protector of Aborigines, Dr Herbert Basedow, in 1911. For over fifty years, Aboriginal children were systematically removed from their families.

Robert Manne, one of Australia's leading social commentators, describes in chilling terms the effects of such removal:

"At its origins, and over the next 50 years, the policy and practice of child removal was grounded in the astonishing indifference to two of the most fundamental of all human needs - the bond of the child to its mother and to the rootedness of the individual identity in a culture".

At its height the practice of child removal took place at the same time as the practice described by J.A. Carrodus, the first secretary of the Department of the Interior in 1933:

"the policy of the government ... to encourage the marriage of half-castes with whites or half-caste, the object being to 'breed out' the colour as far as possible".

Think of this from a child rearing perspective.

Many of the people who, were victims of these policies are mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, grandparents and great grandparents today. There is not one Aboriginal family that has not been touched in some way by these practices. The effects of past practices live on in every generation. The parenting skills of many of our people have been devastated. The fabric of our societies ripped. Our extended family structures compromised. Our languages lost.

To quote again from Sir William Deane:

“Where there is no room for national pride or national shame about the past, there can be no national soul. The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future”.

The life choices and chances of an Aboriginal child in my country are not good.

The overwhelming disadvantage that Aboriginal people face today in Australia flows from past injustice and oppression.

Statistics compiled on Indigenous mortality, health, education and employment tell a sorry story of present human sickness, suffering and death which can be traced to the past.

Aboriginal people comprise just 2% of the total Australian population and have the worst social justice outcomes on every social indicator.

Here are the facts:

- Indigenous people die on average 15-20 years earlier than other Australians, and are far more likely to suffer infectious disease and chronic disease.
- Indigenous babies are 2-3 times more likely to be of low birth weight, and 2-4 times more likely to die at birth than non-Indigenous babies. (Source: The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples published in March 1997 by the Australian Bureau of Statistic and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.)
- Almost half of Aboriginal young people aged 15 and over have no formal education or have not reached year 10 levels.
- Fewer than one third of Indigenous students finish secondary school. (Source: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey.)
- The unemployment rate for Indigenous people is 23% in comparison with non-Indigenous people with an unemployment rate of 9%. (Source: Australian Census 1996.)

In every society there is a clearly a strong relationship between poverty and illiteracy; poverty and crime; between poverty and unemployment; and between poverty, disease and death.

- 19% of the Australian prison population is Aboriginal.
- In one Australian Territory, the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people make up 63% of the total prison population. (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics December 2000)

Mr Michael Dodson expressed so eloquently our Australian state of affairs:

“A certain kind industrial deafness has developed.  
The meaning of these figures is not heard or felt.  
We die silently under these statistics”