



'The Prepared Adult as the key to the Montessori approach for Indigenous communities of Australia.'

By Pamela Nunn

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Preface

‘Observing children who are healthy, tranquil, innocent, sensitive, full of love and joy, ready to help others – I am forced to reflect upon the amount of human energy wasted because of an ancient error and great sin that disseminated injustice to the very roots of mankind. It is the adult who produces in the child, his incapacities, his confusion, and his rebellion. It is the adult who shatters the character of the child and deprives it of its vital impulses. And more than that it is the adult who affects to correct the errors, the psychological deviations, and the lapses in character that he himself has produced in the child. So we find ourselves in a labyrinth without an exit.

Until the adults consciously face their errors and correct them, they will find themselves in a forest of insoluble problems. And children, becoming in their turn adults, will be victims of the same error, transmitting, it from generation to generation.’

Maria Montessori *‘The Child in the Family’*

The previous despairing allegation against adults seemingly shines little light or warmth. However there is a way to regain hope and confidence! Dr. Maria Montessori’s belief in the transformation of the adult as a means to aid the child’s natural development abounds with great optimism and trust. Dr Montessori’s plan, based upon the inner strength of the prepared adult, and sustained by absolute faith in the child, encompasses the capacity and the will to break the cycle, and discover a path out of the labyrinth! It demands a new revelation of self, and an honest unconditional relationship with the child.

‘With the support of the prepared adult, the child with his unlimited possibilities can be the transformer of humanity, just as he is its creator. The child brings us great hope and a new vision.’¹

Included below are brief biographies, in alphabetical order, of the people who were either interviewed or contributed orally to the text of this paper. The weight of their dialogue may seem disproportionate, however this primary sourced material arises from direct first hand experience with Indigenous children and acts in support of Dr. Maria Montessori’s vision of the prepared adult. Written documentation equivalent in kind has not been widely published within Australia.

Donald Anderson

After holding senior positions within the Queensland Department of Education, Don established and acted as Director of Western Cape College in Weipa; student population of 785. He is an advocate for quality education for all children, and a passionate spokesman and practical supporter of Indigenous children in remote areas of Queensland. Don assists with the responsibility for funding and policy direction of education for Far Northern Queensland, inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 4 – 17 years.

Faith Ariel Landy

Faith is a qualified Montessori 3 – 6 Directress, and in 2002 became the first Indigenous person in Australia to receive an AMI Montessori Diploma. Faith is currently living and working in Redfern in Sydney and studying for the Montessori Assistants to Infancy Diploma.

Jean Little

Jean’s tribal name is Gaarkamunda meaning Bush Fire Hawk. Jean’s homeland is Mapoon in Far North Queensland. Jean has been a nurse and teacher, and she is passionate about Community Development processes and the value of facilitation in allowing all individuals to ultimately take charge of their own lives.

¹ Montessori, Maria. (1949) The Absorbent Mind Clio Press Oxford England 1988 page 60



Anne Mauger

Anne Mauger is the Principal of Cairns West Primary School and has been instrumental in supporting the establishment of a Montessori Children's House – 'The Dancing Brolga's' within the state school system. Anne has mentored and been financially influential in support of Indigenous people attending Montessori teacher training courses within Australia.

Letitia Murgha

Letitia works as a tutor, leader and advisor to Indigenous adolescents at Western Cape College in Weipa, and is currently training as a Montessori 3 – 6 Directress at the AMI AMTEF course. Letitia has great patience and respect for the wisdom of the elders of her community.

Jennifer Rioux

Jenny is a trained Montessori Directress and in cooperation with her husband Joel, has established a Montessori environment at Wadja Wadja Independent School in the township of Woorabinda, in central Queensland. This school effectively serves Indigenous children and adolescents in a remote area. Jenny understands the need for a functional and sensitive educational approach for Indigenous students.

Joel Rioux

Joel completed his Montessori training in Bergamo, has served as Director of schools in urban areas of Australia and now has committed to work and live within the highly transient Indigenous community of Woorabinda, west of Rockhampton, Queensland – population 1150. Since 1986 the town has been run by an Aboriginal Council. Joel, together with his wife Jennifer, has the challenging and rewarding role as the Montessori adult working with a group of Indigenous students at Wadja Wadja Independent School. 200 Aboriginal students are enrolled, and the school employs indigenous assistants who act as parent and community liaisons.

Louisa Sagiba

Louisa is training as a Montessori 3 – 6 Directress on the current AMI AMTEF course. She teaches Indigenous and non-Indigenous children at the 'Dancing Brolga's' Montessori class in Cairns, Queensland. Louisa was born on Thursday Island and, as a Torres Strait Islander, has great rapport with the parents and community of Cairns West, communicating widely whilst meeting the needs of young Indigenous children.

Opening statement

This paper has been the outcome of two recent visits to the Cape York region of far North Queensland. The first was as an admirer of a harsh and very beautiful landscape, the second as an observer of history and communities of people in Weipa, Mapoon, Napranum, Aurukun, Cairns, Woorabinda, and also at Gamarada Early Childhood centre in Redfern, Sydney.

The most recent research expedition had as its goal the production of a documentary film showing the development of relationships between Montessori and Indigenous communities.

The personal journey from discouragement to hope was inspired by the Montessori adults encountered along the way, as well as Dr Montessori's vision of education for a new world. This paper therefore offers corroborative affirmation for Montessori ideology, confirming that no matter how severe the circumstances, there is a sensitive solution that can alter outcomes, vastly improve lives and offers an optimistic future.

The study of the Indigenous people of Australia as a representative group must be taken as just one case in point – chosen because this island nation is my homeland. Consequently empathy and compassion for the original inhabitants cannot be dismissed, set aside or forgotten. Drawing on this



particular example is however a way of applying or relating to the people of one region, Montessori theory that, since first spoken and recorded, pertains strongly, surely and truthfully to the people of the world at large.

Historical Background

Oceania is considered to be part of the 'New World', as distinct from the Old World of Europe. Ironically, this classification is not applicable to the nation of people who have occupied the continent of Australia from 40,000 to 80,000 years ago. Australian Aboriginal society has the longest continuous cultural history on earth.

Many people, Indigenous and non Indigenous alike, are working today repairing psychological damage to a nation of people who have suffered by having their voice and livelihood, and their very lives, taken away with the advent of European settlement in 1788. With this settlement, Terra Nullius was declared, meaning 'uninhabited.'

Contact was not advantageous from the start. Aboriginal people had little resistance to disease - small pox plagues in 1792 and 1822 decimated the population. Interaction with pastoralists and missionaries saw further tragedy. Throughout the 1930's, 40's, 50's the often-forced removal of children of mixed race (conservatively about 15%) with the aim of integrating them into 'white society' caused untold heartbreak and enduring damage to families and children.

Not until 1967 could Aboriginal people become 'Australian citizens', and participate in Federal and State elections.

This history cannot be avoided or denied. 'Both Indigenous and non Indigenous people today have inherited that history.'² Now it is the responsibility of all individuals of conscience to find reconciling ways of giving voice to this nation of people, to replace mistrust and resentment of old.

'The term Indigenous, although conveying *original inhabitants*, often of a particular geographic location, also has socio-political implications, but it is hoped that this term carries no 'us and them' connotation.'³

The social reality for the indigenous population of Australia in the 21st century may be painted on two canvases. One is the disturbing picture beset with troubles arising from a culture abused and exploited. The other mural is a beauty to behold - highlighted with such strong colours, depth of field, and perception, possible only because it materializes from a society with deep roots - one of the oldest civilisations on the planet.

Strengths of Culture

Existing fundamental strengths of culture embrace the social organisation of Indigenous people, inclusive of their art, music, dance, oral literature, language, spirituality, established roles, ritual, kinship, and the innate sense of belonging to land.

James Jeffrey writing about 'Kakadu, Spirit Country' says 'There is nothing self conscious here - the culture is a living one, kept breathing by the Aborigines who live here.'⁴ The same sentiment is repeated by Robyn Davidson, a friend of the Pitjantjatjara people, 'I am privileged to be with them because there is nothing false or contrived here.'⁵ And again, from teachers in remote Aboriginal

² Miller, James. (1996) From the film 'Why Teach Aboriginal Studies?' ;University of NSW Sydney.

³ Forrest, Simon. (April 2000) Indigenous Knowledge and its Representation within Western Australia's New Curriculum Framework. Paper presented at Australian Indigenous Education Conference. Edith Cowan University Fremantle

⁴ Jeffrey, James. (June 12th 2005) Spirit Country The Australian Newspaper Report.

⁵ Davidson, Robyn. (August 6 2005) Edited extract from 'Return of the Camel Lady' (to Pitjantjatjara region) Griffith Review No 9. Good Weekend Newspaper.



communities, 'We love the qualities they have – honesty, no ego (false opinion of self), their sharing, and brotherhood, their affection, their innocence, their love of the bush, animals and family.'⁶

All over Australia, rural and urban 'Aboriginal people still know their Dreaming, and practice the ceremonies associated with their totem.'⁷ Aboriginal culture is a living resilient culture. The people have 'maintained their worldview, their respect for the land and sea, and their complex social systems with their reciprocal kinship obligations and rights. Elders are respected as the keepers of knowledge and the law,'⁸ in Aboriginal Australia. 'Every stone, leaf, bone has significance. Every blade of grass, every rock has meaning. That's why we know we own this land. It belongs to us – it is a very spiritual place, and they're all my people there.'⁹

On the occasion of 'The Dreaming - Australia's International Indigenous Festival', director, Bill Hauritz reflected, 'Indigenous people could show many of us how to create extended families, teach us how to know and love our cousins we've never met, create art and lore that doesn't change'¹⁰ with politics or time.

'Ubirr rock faces are adorned with a gallery and cultural repository – decorated with ochre inventories of local food, animals, stories and legends, instructions on tribal laws and kinship, and warnings of dreamings and dangerous places.'¹¹ An elder in South Australia voiced, '*For Anangu people, family everything. Us family, all together eh? Coming right again,*' as he mimes with his hands as if knitting something together.

Jennifer Rioux, a Montessori teacher in Woorabinda explains '*they sometimes leave to go up North to see family for a few weeks or months. Family is a priority and comes first always, so any family matters, issues or duties, take precedence over school. Deaths and funerals also really affect the whole community. These students share a bond, a camaraderie with each other that I have never seen before – it is like one big family; they really look out for each other and are very generous towards each other.*'¹²

Maria Montessori wrote of adaptation to culture. 'Every child comes to love the land into which he is born, no matter where it is. However hard the life may be there, he can never find equal happiness elsewhere. Each has received this adaptation, this love of country, from the child he used to be. The child absorbs the customs and habits of the land in which he lives. The customs of a district are acquisitions of childhood since none of these can be natural or inborn. Many of these ways of life are " deeply rooted in the hearts of the people: So deep a sentiment can never be acquired by people already grown up. For an adult visitor, the same sentiment would only be a piece of reasoning. It would not stir the emotions.'¹³

Intangible 'ways of knowing'

In addition to these discernable cultural strengths, there must also be acknowledged the deepest intangible 'ways of knowing' that enrich the lives of Indigenous Australians.

'Indigenous knowledge is local, rooted in place, and experience. It is transmitted orally, often through imitation and demonstration. It is the consequence of practical engagement in everyday life.

⁶ Rioux, Jennifer. (June 2005) Documented Account; Unpublished

⁷ Craven, Rhonda. (1999) Teaching Aboriginal Studies ; Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd NSW p. 89

⁸ Ibid. p. 28

⁹ Jeffrey, James. Spirit Country; Op.Cit. Un named Aboriginal elder.

¹⁰ Hauritz, Bill.(2005) The Dreaming - Australia's International Indigenous Festival Queensland Government Pub. Page 1

¹¹ Jeffrey, James. Spirit Country Op.Cit.

¹² Rioux, Jennifer. Documented Account ; Op. Cit.

¹³ Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind Op. Cit. p. 58



And it is constantly reinforced by experience, trial and error. It is empirical rather than theoretical knowledge, often repetitive. It is constantly changing, being produced and reproduced; discovered as well as lost. Indigenous knowledge is routinely shared. It does not exist in its totality in any one place or individual, and is characteristically situated within broader cultural traditions.¹⁴

It is common knowledge that Aboriginal languages were not written. This means that the passing of knowledge required personal contact. Only *real people* held that knowledge.

Importantly, without written language and (written data) only *the living* are able to pass on the information. Consequently, all those living, held the collective knowledge of the group, making Indigenous knowledge cumulative. Although *written* texts were not used to transmit information, image, art, dance, and story were ways of interpreting the world around and absorbing the 'ways of knowing' - a framework for interpreting and categorizing past, present, and new information. This framework is built on cultural beliefs, values, practices and experiences.

Spoken testament from Indigenous Australians reinforces these views of researchers and academics.

*'Knowledge of culture and belief is passed onto us through the generations. We learnt by looking and listening to everyone. Our culture is knowing and respecting who we are and where we come from, learning from the past. Grass roots knowledge is how you relate to the environment, knowing that by living in harmony with your fellows, where you fit in your family structure. Generational knowledge is a way of living for us. Being absorbed in our environment and being constantly taught about cultural values, beliefs, and language - all from an early age. It is something from within. Aboriginal knowledge is not learning it; it is the feel it.'*¹⁵

'It is that intangible knowledge, our lore, which we carry in the deepest part of our being, and which sustains us. The exploration of that culture, and the expression of it, is critical to the development of our well-being. As a nation, we search for that national well-being - an Aussie identity that aims to bring us together.'¹⁶

Concerns

A recent report handed to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that substandard living conditions of many Aboriginal children remain Australia's greatest shame. The statement draws attention to the prevalence of the eye disease trachoma, higher rates of malnutrition, and to ear, skin, chest and gastro-intestinal infections among Aboriginal children. It also refers to their over-representation in juvenile justice centres, foster care and their low school retention rate.

In 1999, John Reeves QC, said that 'the loss of self reliance, and the build up of economic dependency of Aboriginal Australians on other Australians is conducive to hopelessness, despair, and anti social behavior on the one hand and, contempt and hostility on the other.'

The intention here is not to delve into the historical injustices of the Indigenous people of this land. However many 'well meaning pursuits of moral idealism has led to the adoption of policies that have not always been in the best interests of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.'¹⁷ Education may well be one of these! Indigenous enrolments at university have declined in the last decade in comparison to other enrolments despite policies to foster more positive outcomes.

¹⁴ Ellen, R. and Harris, H. Concepts of Indigenous Environmental Knowledge East-west Environmental Linkages Network Workshop, Canterbury. May 1996 Online.

¹⁵ Primary sourced material from Indigenous Australians interviewed in Cape York.

¹⁶ Hauritz, Bill. The Dreaming - Australia's International Indigenous Festival Op. Cit. p. 1

¹⁷ Moore, Des. (May 2000) We stole their Country, they stole our Biscuits Unpublished Address pg. 2



Continued neglect of *education of a beneficial nature*, threatens to create yet another long term problem.

'It seemed to me that many schools went about the work of instruction entirely backward, crushing children's natural curiosity and deafening them to the wisdom of their own internal voice.'¹⁸

Professor Mary Ann Bin-Sallik, speaks of the Aboriginal people living in her State.

'Indigenous people constitute 28% of the Northern Territory population. A large number of this group are 0-15 years of age. The poorly educated adult population, have life expectancies that are 20 years lower than that of other Australians. The plight of Indigenous Territorians is further exacerbated by long-term educational neglect resulting from past experiments. Currently Australian Indigenous youth are amongst the most educationally disadvantaged. What will be their plight in ten years time when they will be expected to take leadership roles in their communities? What will be their skills? Will their lives be meaningful for them? I dread to think of the legacy we will be leaving behind if we don't act now.'¹⁹

Lance, a member of the Pitjantjatjara people, says in his own way, that the problem in remote places is still poverty. 'Owning land is all very well, but if you are poor, what is the point of it? There is no work, few means by which to learn new skills. Young people fall into the twilight zone between the world of their elders and the world of European Australia, a **demoralized** state. The traditional systems of sharing are breaking down. What money there is, is absorbed by 10% of the families, while others go hungry - an unheard of occurrence in the old days.'²⁰

Lance can barely write his own name. His father lived for 40 years without running into a white fella. And yet, Lance has to know so much about how the modern world works. He has to be able to lobby politicians, deal with mining company executives, lawyers, and bureaucrats, organise meetings, chair them, be able to use 21st century communications technology, and protect the old knowledge, whilst leading his people.

Most Australians accept that there is a collective responsibility to support, nourish and sustain Lance. The concept of historic injustices has been expanded beyond the taking of land to 'include the use of resources such as fish, the destruction of tribal custom, the invasion of rights, and ultimately a kind of dishonour.'²¹

For too long, the expressions of the Indigenous people were the 'voices of those who were often unheard, disregarded, or worse, habitually regarded as non-existent'²² by the broader Australian community. However, the fact of the matter is, that we cannot hurt others without hurting ourselves. Our lives are linked to the lives of others through inevitable ties of social interdependence.

The only Indigenous member of the Federal Parliament of Australia, Senator Aden Ridgeway (now retired), called for immediate action to involve young Indigenous people in the life of the nation. "I see a dire need for Indigenous youth to be able to look around and see Indigenous people involved at all levels of public life and see and respect and have an understanding of their aspirations for the future."²³

Repressed people across the ages articulate that 'we have had enough of people ordering our existence. A free people must learn to manage its own destiny.'²⁴ It is clear that change is necessary.

¹⁸ Brooks, Geraldine. (2005) March Harper Collins Pub. Page 37

¹⁹ Bin-Sallik, Professor Mary Ann. (2005) Member of the National Indigenous Council advising the Government of Australia. Published Article in Health Care Australia Journal.

²⁰ Davidson, Robyn. Edited extract from 'Return of the Camel Lady' (to Pitjantjatjara region) Op. Cit.

²¹ Minogue (1998)

²² Inaugural National Indigenous Writers Festival Report (21st August 2005) Online www.abc.net.au

²³ Ridgeway, Senator Aden. (2003) Statement by Member of the Federal Parliament of Australia,

²⁴ Brooks, Geraldine. March Op. Cit. Page 333



It has been said that the measure of a mature democratic society rests upon the just way individuals and governments act towards those who are most vulnerable and those who may be deprived. It is then a matter of shame that social issues of substance abuse, gambling, petrol sniffing, passive welfare, domestic violence, and unemployment, loom large for so many Indigenous communities in Australasia. These problems are undeniably real. There is a 'big ragged hole'²⁵ through which right, decency, and proper help for Aboriginal people has fallen! The morality and ethics of appropriate assistance for Aboriginal people is in question. By any measure, it is evident that educational solutions enabling spirited self-sustainability have not been entirely successful... not through financial millions, government policy, grand plans, or systems of education.

Joel and Jenny Rioux from Wadja Wadja school admit that *'children come to class with a multitude of personal, family, emotional afflictions and very, very low self-esteem. You have to be prepared for students coming late to class, as their sense of time and the importance of time is different to ours. You need to be prepared for students who are tired because they walked around all night. They may come to class just to sleep in safety. They may come grumpy because they are hungry; they put their head on the table and say, "I don't feel like working." 'Prepare yourself for the state of the houses, graffiti, alcohol, drugs. Sometimes you want to vomit and cry because you can't be positive every hour of every day. Reality hits you. Parents and adults themselves have not had positive experiences with education so they are not interested in our classes.'*

'Unfortunately petrol sniffing, youth suicide, and alcohol affects these young lives. If a student comes from an unhappy home they are more at risk of falling into substance abuse because it makes them feel happy and takes away their pain. Two of my students have tried both petrol and suicide due to no family support, no love, and no one to turn to. Some days what the students need most is a hug, some gentle words, a sleep, something to eat, and a safe, non threatening, peaceful happy place where they can be themselves, free from abuse, and totally accepted. This place – the only place is the Montessori classroom.'

So much can be learnt from **Dr Maria Montessori** who dedicated lifelong scientific endeavour toward the restructuring of society based upon freedom and peaceful change. She expressed that 'society must fully recognise the social rights of the child and prepare for him a world capable of ensuring spiritual development. All nations should reach an understanding, to bring about a sort of truce that would permit each of them to devote itself to the cultivation of its own human members in order to find therein the practical solutions to social problems that today seem insuperable. Perhaps the attainment of peace would then be easy and close at hand, like waking from a dream, like freeing ourselves from a hypnotic spell.'²⁶

The Hon. Peter Costello, the Treasurer of the Government of Australia, visited some of the Aboriginal Elders of remote Cape York communities and spoke, in a radio interview, about the outcomes of abandonment such as society rejection, non acceptance, non conformity, and a sense of de-valued citizenship. Links to poor health snap closely at the heels of such dilemmas.

Responsibilities

In 2005, it is the 'responsibility of all Australians to support principles designed to guarantee freedom and equality and enable diversity to flourish. Social equity allows *everyone* to contribute to the social, political, and economic life of Australia, free from discrimination, including the grounds of race, culture, religion, language, location, gender or place of birth.'²⁷ Liberal thinkers can see that benefits for all Australians flow from productive diversity, that is, the significant cultural, social, and

²⁵ Garner, Helen. (2004) Joe Cinque's Consolation; Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd page 263

²⁶ Montessori, Maria. Education and Peace (1949) Clio Pub.Oxford. Page 27

²⁷ Spokesperson for the Council for Multicultural Australia (2005) Established in 2000. The Australian Government Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.



economic dividends, which arise from the rich diversity of the whole population. The focusing on the *problems* of Indigenous Australians struggling to maintain their very being in our westernised culture, has 'diverted our energies and heightened our arrogance. We are not allowing ourselves to listen and learn from, a culture which is about as old and as beautiful as it gets.'²⁸

'The voices of Indigenous Australians, when heeded, are passionate and poetic, desperate and demanding, strong and shrewd, and at times loud and luscious. Indigenous voices offer new bodies of knowledge, which are breaking new ground – challenging history, theory and sociology. It is not a detached look at history – they are telling powerful stories about people they love. It is important to tell the truth for those people. We need voices that are relevant, real, and encouraging! The stories are so alive – the tragedy is that Australia seems to have insufficient ticker to listen,' says Bruce Pascoe of the Inaugural National Indigenous Writers Festival.

Wherever or whoever we are, we can all assist by charging ourselves with sharing certain responsibility if not for the past, then for the future! 'Every informed Australian has the responsibility to stop the cycle of misinformation that is disseminated. The greatest contribution can be made by individuals who have it with in their influence to ensure that misconceptions, stereotypes and racism are addressed, so that better informed children (who are our future) are able to create an Australian society we can all be proud of.'²⁹ This view is not limited to one nation. Dr Montessori pinned her hopes on our collective 'pride and privilege of belonging to humanity'³⁰ and envisioned a new era of global social reform and cohesion based on peace and understanding.

It is obvious that a *multi - faceted* approach involving health, education, employment, and housing is required if issues of concern are to be addressed. Associate Professor Boni Robertson a leading Aboriginal academic insists that 'without dealing with all of the issues that we know impact on why some of these children are not participating in education systems and going to school, is remiss and short-sighted and wrong.' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders themselves acknowledge that education is the way out of the labyrinth - 'the way out of the cycle of dependency.'³¹ Jean Little, elder and Aboriginal spokesperson, of Weipa, sees education as a way to unite through inclusivity, when she insists that all children must be recipients of rigorous education, not just the marginalized.

No one would argue with 'motherhood' statements such as: Education plays a critical role in a person's life chances and allows participation in the society to which he/she belongs.

Education has a bearing on other aspects of life, such as employment, health, housing and general well being, and for improvement in socio economic status. But in a wider context, education is a profound way to achieve social justice for not only Aboriginal people, but all people. However for years, reform and real ways to help Aboriginal people facilitate for themselves, have danced on the lips of bureaucracy. For years, Indigenous people have been 'subjected to value judgments about their cultural characteristics which are seen to be traits in need of correcting or as 'difficulties' to be eliminated.'³² Generations of Indigenous communities have suffered at the hands of system after system, imposed to 'fix the problem'.

What if it were perceived that a whole generation of children **were no problem?!**

There is of course, a danger in non-experts commenting on clearly difficult, complex, and sensitive issues. However adults should always act as advocates for children. "My passion about issues facing

²⁸ Hauritz, Bill. The Dreaming - Australia's International Indigenous Festival Op. Cit. p.1

²⁹ Craven, R and Rigney, Robert. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit. page 62

³⁰ Montessori, Maria. The Child Society and the World Clio Press Ltd. Pub 1979. Pg 112

³¹ Landy-Ariel, Faith.(2005) Interview with Montessori teacher.

³² Report ; (July 1995) Aboriginal Early Education Research Project. Education Department of Western Australia



Indigenous people will not allow me to be a passive bystander”, says Mary Ann Bin-Sallik, Member of the National Indigenous Council.

Jenny Rioux, writes, ‘there are countless young Aboriginal children in need of basic human tendencies being met. Sensitive periods are overlooked and unacknowledged.’

Professor Mary Ann Bin-Sallik, laments, ‘It is as though society washes its hands of those who build the next generation of humanity.’³³ However children cannot survive abandonment.

Surely then ‘social responsibility would demand adequate protection of children, (ensuring) the guardianship of their development.’³⁴ Speaking on the general state of childhood, Maria Montessori said, ‘In the midst of continual progress *in favour of adults*, children have remained isolated without means of communication that would allow society to become aware of their condition. They are victims without society being aware.’³⁵

This would require that adults were prepared for the task!

Dr. Maria Montessori thought that ‘the first step in the integral resolution of the problem of education must not, therefore, **be taken toward the child, but toward the adult educator**. He must change his moral attitudes. He must divest himself of many preconceptions.’³⁶

It is time to turn to *the individual* as a vital component! Confidence is placed in the morally responsible individual adult, as the defining hinge on which all-else swings. This prepared adult must be willing to implement change first in him or her self, and then act in conjunction with all support networks, to truly aid the Indigenous child – and indeed all children!

What then can be done?

Many have tried to give aid, often with the outcome of disinterest, mistrust, and suspicions being aroused from Indigenous communities. Those assisting must be wary of seeming to give ‘special treatment’ as part of their package. So called ‘special treatment’ began for the Koori people at the dawn of British invasion!³⁷

Educationalists and humanitarians see the just treatment of the child as the way forward.

Inappropriate solutions.

Unfortunately, ‘educational debates usually occur *about them*, and occur *around them*, led by earnest adults, whilst children live in a world run by adults, and remain the last significant section of the community still largely voiceless.’³⁸ ‘This kind of education has generally been inappropriate for Indigenous people. The overriding ethos has had little meaning for them and Indigenous children were and are often belittled, confused, frightened and shamed,’³⁹ says Ardyn Masterman, who established an Aboriginal Montessori education facility ‘The Dancing Brolga’s in Cairns, which continues to successfully meet the needs of Indigenous children today.

³³ Bin-Sallik, Professor Mary Ann Member of the National Indigenous Council advising the Government of Australia. Op. Cit.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Montessori, Maria. (1983) *The Secret of Childhood*; Sangam Books Ltd. London P.224

³⁶ Montessori, Maria. (1989) *The Child in the Family* Clio Press Ltd. England. Page 20

³⁷ Wilson Miller, James. and Craven, R. *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* Op. Cit. page 131

³⁸ Report. (February 5-6th 2005) News Review Sydney Morning Herald ‘The School I’d Like’

³⁹ Masterman, Ardyn. (August 1996) *Feasibility Report*. Proposed Aboriginal Montessori Education Facility in Cape York.



Jenny Rioux, expresses that *'it is just that the education system of their most recent experience has not been at all adapted to their needs or culture. Thus students were failing instead of succeeding, or is it that the system failed them? 'They have come to this school with a multitude of educational deficiencies and have not grasped even basic concepts. Therefore they are afraid of failure, have little confidence and seem to doubt their own abilities.'*⁴⁰

In addition, the accepted attitude was that traditional 'teachers thought their main role was the imparting of knowledge.'⁴¹

How then can the Montessori approach act differently in support of Indigenous people?

In addition to a proven way of engaging individuals in learning, that is successful because it follows the natural development of the child, the approach encompasses a vital intrinsic ingredient - **the attitude, mannerisms, and knowledge of the prepared adult.**

It is a most precious gift.

What does constitute the prepared adult?

'Prepared' equates with being ready and operationally equipped. This is a somewhat misleading view because the responsibility of preparedness is life long and never really 'finished'. As a Montessori teacher says, 'It is always a quest within your self to adapt, improve, test, think, reflect, act and try again.'⁴² Alternatively 'un-prepared' denotes being not ready, *untrained, unqualified, unaware, and ill-equipped*. It is quite evident that without being prepared, the adult acts as an *impediment*.

As the key starting point, the *prepared* adult enables the facilitation of many *additional* ways to support and aid development of the human being.

Desired Qualities

In her extensive writings, Dr. Montessori provides in-depth clarification pertaining to **desired qualities of the adult**. It is *only* this type of adult who is deemed appropriately able to enrich young children's lives and set them on the path to independent living.

True preparation of the adult comprises three levels, - each one embracing meticulous knowledge. Technical in-depth knowledge of the materials, acquired through teacher training; and scientific understanding of the true nature of the child arrived at through study and acute observation, are two of the levels. The responsibility to uphold and maintain this technical and scientific knowledge is absolutely essential.

The third phase requires knowledge also, but of the *inner self*. Maria Montessori identified this as spiritual or moral preparation, necessitating the recognition and removal of personal defenses built up over a lifetime.

'The basis of this preparation consists in going through a fundamental change of outlook.'⁴³

'The starting preparation demanded of a Montessori adult is that he or she should examine himself, and **become humble**, and to ask in what manner does he consider the child?'⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Rioux, Jennifer. Documented Account; Op. Cit.

⁴¹ Stoll Lillard, Angeline. (2005) Montessori. The Science Behind the Genius. Oxford University Press, Inc. New York. page 282

⁴² Rioux, Joel. Documented Account; Op. Cit.

⁴³ Standing, E.M. (1984) Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work. Plume. Pub. By Penguin. New York Page 298

⁴⁴ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Op. Cit. page114



A Montessori practitioner, in difficult remote circumstances, is able to say, *'I have to always remind myself that the reality I see in front of me is just a perception formed by myself, because of my past experience. It is important to hold onto your flexibility. Accept the unacceptable, but not be indifferent.'*⁴⁵

Dr. Montessori believed that 'the training of the teacher, who is to aid life, is something far more than a learning of ideas. It includes the training of character; it is a preparation of the spirit.'⁴⁶ '**Spiritual humility** allows us to understand the child and should be the most essential part of a teacher's preparation.'⁴⁷

The preparation of the adult is 'more than study, more than becoming a man of culture. The crucial point is a moral one! He must be prepared inwardly.'⁴⁸ Those deficient in spiritual preparation hinder the natural development of the child, and the child's sensitiveness is far greater than anything we can imagine. This analysis necessitates the identification of that part of him or herself which may become an obstacle in his relationship with the child. Without inner reflection the individual may remain oblivious that 'the powerful adult himself is the unknowing cause of the difficulties against which he battles.'⁴⁹

Change requires effort.

Inner preparation cannot be seen as effortless or resulting in an immediate transformation. It requires a lifetime of both deep reflection and passionate commitment.

However, for the committed adult, this intense effort is worthy of the child. It is imperative to push ourselves away from safety and comfort. There is something of psychological value in confronting and challenging and unsettling ourselves. Without exposing ourselves to disquieting hard facts, we are in many ways, open to prejudice, and run the risk of becoming biased in opinion and narrow-minded in spirit. Dr. Montessori understood that 'no adult can become a teacher of love without a special **effort**, without opening the eyes of his own consciousness in order to see a world more vast than his own.'⁵⁰ She wrote, 'in all those who have done something of fundamental importance, you will find there has always been a strenuous period in their lives which preceded the doing of this actual piece of work. There must have been an intense effort made - and this acted as a spiritual preparation.'⁵¹

The whole of our life prepares us indirectly for the future, and although it is not necessarily easy, 'the goal of the going will reward every hardship of the way.'⁵²

Application of the will is a requisite for change in any adult. It is essential to accept and adopt the cry 'If not you, then who? If not now, then when? If not here, then where?'⁵³

Maria Montessori believed that 'deep preparation of the spirit' resulted from personal striving. 'No one could ever become great just by imitation.'⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Rioux, Joel. Documented Account; Op. Cit.

⁴⁶ Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind Op. Cit. p. 120

⁴⁷ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Op. Cit. page 145

⁴⁸ Ibid. Page 107

⁴⁹ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. P. 71

⁵⁰ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. Page 15

⁵¹ Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind Op. Cit. Pg. 146

⁵² Brooks, Geraldine. March Op. Cit. Page 111.

⁵³ Little, Jean. (2005) Montessori - A vital Approach to Education for children and potential teachers in Remote Areas of Australia. Unpublished Lecture.

⁵⁴ Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind Op. Cit. Pg. 146



Qualities of the prepared adult

Have specific *qualities* of the prepared adult been identified, as being fundamentally advantageous?

Dr. Montessori in her lectures and texts documented both strengths of the adult character that would aid the child, and weaknesses of disposition that would act as an impediment to development. Interestingly, although many other educational approaches now acknowledge the critical importance of the formative years, no other teacher training seems to place great emphasis on the inner preparation of the adult. It is as if this critical aspect of an adult's character remains outside the realm of educational discussion, concealed and private. And yet as we have seen it has such an influence, both positively and negatively on the life of the child.

Concurrence from non-Montessori educators

Rhonda Craven, in her book 'Teaching Aboriginal Studies' expounds the concept of teacher's as facilitators, and encouragingly, she discusses the 'shift away from the role of teacher as controller to that of mentor and guide - a participant with learners. This is not someone who 'lets things happen' with outcomes being 'chancy at best! This new teacher requires a meticulously prepared environment, knowledge and understanding of the learners, and great application and thoughtfulness. An important part of the role of the facilitator is the *suspension of personal judgment*. Vital to facilitation is a secure and accepting environment in which a diversity of views can be freely explored, and where children are encouraged to see an issue from perspectives other than their own.'⁵⁵

Anne Mauger, Principal of Cairns West State School recognizes that the qualities of the trained Montessori adult have largely contributed to healthy waiting lists for Indigenous families desiring enrolment for their young children. The Montessori environment within her school has full enrollment, characteristically not experienced by other classes.

Optimistically many educationalists agree that there *are positive qualities* that adults should adopt, including *enthusiasm, empathy, engagement, and appropriate expectations* of discipline, in teaching and learning.

In addition, it is acknowledged that there is a process of maturing and understanding that is open ended. The adult must be equipped with a reasoning manner, and have the ability to handle complex emotions. This includes the ability to resolve conflict in a mature responsible way, to maintain composure, and be able to control his or her moods. Conversely, deficient qualities are also revealed. Adults are unprepared if they lack a secure and developed sense of self to rely upon in times of difficulty.

Dr. Montessori spoke of adults acquiring a 'moral alertness.'⁵⁶ 'As we develop our moral and ethical compass we will be guided as we become committed to action on behalf of the child. Without action visible, tangible and real, we have no power to transform ourselves in order to serve the child better.'⁵⁷ Words from scripture state 'He that would be the greatest amongst you, let him be one that serves'⁵⁸ and this idea of leading us to the child is reflected again in the teachings of the greatest spiritual philosophies of the world.

Dr. Montessori says that the child 'must be protected by an external environment animated by the warmth of love, and the richness of value, where he is wholly accepted and never inhibited.

⁵⁵ Craven, R. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit. page 232

⁵⁶ Montessori, Maria.(1966) The Discovery of the Child; Clio Press Ltd. England. Page 151

⁵⁷ Lawrence, Lynne. A Change Within - Removing Obstacles to Development Op. Cit

⁵⁸ Standing, E.M. Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work.Op. Cit. page 301



The adult must change his attitude toward the child. We must revere the young.¹⁵⁹

The adult needs to acquire a 'deeper **sense of the dignity** of the child as a human being, a new appreciation of the significance of his activities, understand his needs, and a reverence for him as the creator of the adult-to-be.'¹⁶⁰

Complicit in this concept of **servicing the child** is the essence of service, which implies that the adult will champion the cause of the child, always act as an advocate, and work selflessly.

Joel Rioux details particular aspects of his Indigenous pupils, '*Students are very delicate, afraid, and sensitive. They need to be treated carefully, with mindfulness, respect, love, and understanding, even though we can't understand what they are going through. This is the essence of service, and it is the challenge we have chosen to tackle.*'¹⁶¹

The Montessori adult is prepared as a practitioner but also personally. In terms of personal preparation, 'the capacity to observe is a main goal of training.'¹⁶² Observation requires 'a patient attitude and self abnegation.'¹⁶³ The adult must acquire the sensitivity to recognise the child's fundamental intrinsic needs, as separate from his wants or inclinations. 'If we were to establish a principle it would be to allow the child participation in our lives. To extend to the child this hospitality costs nothing. It depends solely on the emotional preparation of the adult.'¹⁶⁴

This realisation is documented in the personal account of Christabel Macleod, a young teaching graduate. '*I went expecting to give and be made to feel wanted and needed in a way that I wasn't in my present circumstances. Perhaps the job would be my salvation, teaching in the remote Pitjantjatjara lands of South Australia. Nothing had prepared me for the landscape. The spinafex was like shards of glass on a sea of undulating sand. On arrival I looked with my blue European eyes and saw filth and poverty and buildings made of fibro that I was to call my workplace. At the school we made something from very little, and sometimes the ideas flowed and worked, and at other times I, and they, lost our collective patience, and I felt I could never love these people. Many things, the body odour, the bad health, the dogs, affronted my senses, but the most troubling was the affront to my sense of identity. I felt inadequate to the task. It seemed like a year of funerals. Alcoholism, diabetes, petrol sniffing, misadventure, all took their toll. It was a year of drought and then floods, and I came to realize that what I had learned about what I had done in this tiny Aboriginal community, **was not about me!** I stopped looking at ways to improve their lot and started to ask them what they wanted. We visited the old sites that many of the older Aboriginal people inhabited before their encounters with Europeans. Many people were involved and parents said it was the right kind of activity to bring the community together. The debate about Aboriginal life **has to change** from always being about what European adults think and want!*'¹⁶⁵

Wisdom is one quality acquired with experience and insight. Maria Montessori observed a Japanese father demonstrate deep comprehension of the needs of his child, as he subjugated his dominant personality in favour of the child. The father took time to respect the boy's focused activity on the pavement, in deference to his own adult progress. Dr. Montessori wrote, 'I greatly admire the wisdom which many peoples have acquired, or perhaps already knew, from their traditions; we, on the other hand, seem anxious only that the child become an adult in society.'

⁵⁹ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. Page 13

⁶⁰ Standing, E.M. Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work Op. Cit. Page 298

⁶¹ Rioux, Joel. Documented Account ; Op. Cit.

⁶² Stoll Lillard, Angeline. Montessori The Science Behind the Genius. Op. Cit. pg 285

⁶³ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. Page 286

⁶⁴ Ibid. Page 23.

⁶⁵ Macleod, Christabel. (2005) This Learning Life. Report. The Australian Newspaper. News Review



One **quality** that seems to recur as vitally important when communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is **respect** - for personal lives that are not always easy, as well as far reaching respect for wider relationships, and cultural foundations.

Jenny says that *'even though it is necessary to be a prepared adult in any environment, in this one in particular, the children are so very fragile that you as the adult must **at all times** respect every individual.'* Collaborators with Indigenous people have an *added* responsibility, recognised by activist Sir Bob Geldof. *'It's such an attractive proposition to be peaceful, but more importantly, to show absolute respect for those in whose name we're here.'*⁶⁶

Adverse Qualities

Having promoted positive qualities, Dr. Montessori is equally unwavering in her opinion of the *adverse* qualities of the adult. She verified that *'anger and pride prevent us from understanding the child and entering into a just relationship. Pride is often mitigated by other people's opinion of us, and anger often rises up as a reaction against the strong.'* The prideful adult is particularly undesirable, as he falsely believes that he has *'created in the child all that he is.'*⁶⁷

One crucial awareness is that substitution of the adult's will onto a child is unwarranted; another is to learn restraint towards the child. Refraining from intervention allows a child to activate his potentialities, whereas substitution of a more powerful will creates serious obstacles to natural development.

However Dr Montessori reassures us that it is *'not necessary to become perfect, free from every weakness, in order to become an educator.'*⁶⁸ Joel reflects that *'in some instances in this culture, it is essential to let go of your own behavioural expectations or you will make yourself sick and disappointed.'*

"I always have the reflexive reaction to think –'What I see in front of me is the result of my own interpretations, past indoctrinations, then it helps me to soothe the pain I feel. It is just a fabrication of my mind because of my own judgements."
'Rigidity does not serve you well.'

A New Attitude

It appears that so many of the desirable qualities of the prepared adult are significant in that they are often undisclosed personal attributes, developments of the inner self, which become an essential dimension of our character. These qualities gained over an extended period of introspective living, are of huge intrinsic worth. Primed with beneficial qualities, the prepared adult is obliged to take on a new innovative outlook – a new attitude.

The Montessori prepared adult adjusts to becoming not a teacher but a traveler (with the child foremost), along the pathway of development from birth to adulthood.

This true image of the child is like a beam of light to guide us on the road to a new education!

*'The adult who is in communication with this 'new' child, has a whole **new orientation**. He is no longer the powerful adult, but the adult made humble, serving the new life.'*⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Geldof, Sir Bob. (July 23 2005) Report Sydney Morning Herald Newspaper. Fairfax Pub.

⁶⁷ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Op. Cit. Page 113

⁶⁸ Ibid. Page 108

⁶⁹ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. Page 71



Jenny at Wadja Wadja School, has compelling first hand experience of the need for a new attitude. *'You need to leave your ego behind, leave your expectations at the door, and leave any pre-conceived ideas about 'what should be and how it should be done.'*

You have to be prepared spiritually and emotionally and have the intellectual ability to be sensitive to their needs and their suffering. You need to love these children unconditionally at all times and be patient with their moods and their tiredness.

You need to trust that in their own time, when they are ready, they will come to you, they will want to work and will show an interest in learning. They will let you in and you will connect with them only if you are truly sincere, patient, kind, and willing to take a step back – wait and watch – it will happen.'

The **flexible stance** required of the prepared adult in any situation is reflected in Joel's self-awareness. *'We have a lot to share but we have a lot to learn! The principles have all been redefined in my head. It is like looking at an idea, a concept, with another pair of glasses, at a different angle. Expectations must be high, but not so high as to cause discouragement. If it is too low, children won't come to school, or you will not be respected. I find it fun, challenging, and it makes me smile and question everything that I read. So many articles have been written by rich folks for rich students in cities with rich suburbia, with a golden pen!*

We love it here because when the children are happy, have less mood swings, and smile, it makes you feel that perhaps you make a tiny difference in their life.'

It becomes socially and personally empowering when large numbers of people genuinely care about others as well as themselves. All communities absolutely depend for their health and stability on the trust and safety given to one another, and by accepting responsibility in moral and ethical issues it means moving ourselves from 'chance to choice'! ⁷⁰ Adopting a new attitude relies upon the acceptance of a **chosen** attitudinal direction.

The new attitude of the adult also translates into being well prepared on a purely practical level. Joel reminds us that *'you are building on understanding, so accept that not everything works immediately. Be flexible. Have a sense of humour. Further strategies you have to develop yourself. Also be competent in the practicalities – such as how to evaluate, and how to report to parents. Cultural relevance aside, both physical and conceptual order, of environment and of mind, is vital.'*

Self-realization also comes from Louisa Sagiba, a Torres Strait Islander and Montessori teacher in Cairns. *'Because of my AMI training I understand how important it is to be a model of the behaviour you are asking from the children. You can't be contradictory.'* Transformation of attitude is acknowledged to have been part of the Montessori teacher preparation by Indigenous trainee Directress Letitia Murgha of Weipa. Letitia spoke of being receptive, aware, and 'ready for the change.'⁷¹

James Wilson-Miller cautions us to 'be aware of the difference between the 'well-educated and wisely educated'⁷² person. Be prepared to learn from the Indigenous Community. Be approachable, be empathetic, be yourself.'

To **recapitulate**, the qualities and attitude of adults prepared to work not only with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, but *all* children who share universal tendencies, it would be mandatory to

⁷⁰ Keyserling, Arnold. (1994) Chance and Choice: A Compendium of Ancient and Modern Wisdom Pub; Prima Foundation

⁷¹ Murgha, Letitia. Documented Account

⁷² Wilson Miller, James and Craven, R. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit. page 131



include: self realization, honesty, openness, objectivity, compassion, patience and faith, humility, calmness, optimism, tolerance, and an ongoing sense of wonder and awe.

The prepared adult will have the capacity for selfless hard work, but also the wisdom to take care of self. This valued individual will appreciate that the process of learning is often more important than the product, and that there is more than one pathway to understanding.

Realising that most values are transmitted in non-verbal ways, the strength of character of the prepared adult will assure that his or her positive qualities, certainly those consistently expected from the child, will be modelled as the guiding touchstone. Recognising and letting go of some long-held negative ways of thinking is part of the transformation of the adult. Old attitudes, such as moulding the personality of the child, are discarded. Rejected is the idea of 'employing competition to arouse effort, and giving punishments or rewards to stimulate work. The typical attitude of the unprepared adult is to be always looking for vice - in order to suppress it. But the correction of errors is humiliating and discouraging, and since unenlightened education philosophy rests on this basis, there follows a lowering in the general quality of social life. Undo the flawed attitude of the adult, that says the child is incapable and must be taught!⁷³ 'The basic error is to suppose that a person's will must be broken before he can obey; meaning before he can accept and follow another person's direction.'⁷⁴

Such dominance, smacks of supremacy, authority, and powerful control.

There is a kind of disregard for the **dignity** of children, of which they are very acutely aware. If the dignity of young people *is* discussed, it is often in consideration of their *physical* environment, such as the use of bathrooms, but dignity is rarely spoken of in reference to the habitual interpersonal communication between adult and child, for example the tone of voice of an authority figure, which can inflict a sense of powerlessness.

Hope for the future.

The spiritually prepared altruistic adult then emerges as a prospect of hope!

It is straightforward to imagine how the individual with such qualities of inner depth and unselfish spirit is favourably situated to champion the cause of children in need.

Accepting this premise as a foundation on which to proceed, **why in particular, in a contemporary context, is the Montessori prepared adult such a critical component in the field of education for children in Indigenous communities in both remote and urban areas of Australia?**

The answer is the very core of this discussion, and at its heart is the significant issue of **redressing the balance of power**. Ultimate care and sensitivity is required because individuals are already vulnerable and have been hurt in the past.

Redressing the power balance can be considered on three levels, globally, nationally and individually, and we may see that they are remarkably interrelated, bringing to light 'self determination both for the child and a whole nation of people who had relinquished it.'⁷⁵

On an individual scale, the sensitive adult who is consciously aware 'stands in a just relationship to the child, and finds a pacific new world full of marvels! The liberated child is permitted to manifest his creative capacities, and it is possible to practice the science of education within the latter

⁷³ Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind Op. Cit. Page 219

⁷⁴ Ibid. Page 233

⁷⁵ Report; (August 18 2005) Health and Science. The Sydney Morning Herald. Fairfax Pub.



framework.⁷⁶ Whereas under a powerful adult, the child is in a permanently defensive state, if he has not already been completely repressed. 'Respect is on one side only; the weak respecting the strong.'⁷⁷ Often the young child 'fails in a reasoned way to realize the injustice. However his spirit feels it and becomes oppressed or even deformed.'⁷⁸ Behaviours such as timidity, lying, tears, and fear manifest in the child representing his unconscious defensive state. As has been stated earlier, 'the powerful adult himself is the unknowing cause of the difficulties against which he battles.'⁷⁹

Jenny speaks of her student's compelling desire for trust. '*When they feel that they are on an equal, respectful footing with you, then, and only then will you be able to engage them in work, learning and achieving!*' 'All children learn best in a non threatening environment.'⁸⁰

Joel recognizes that '*they don't want to be dominated and told what to do, because this happens at home and I see that they hate it. I never overpower them. When they have freedom and choice making they are so happy and content in the classroom – they love it.*'

On a general level, Forbes reporting in 'Health and Science' links independence and autonomy to psychological well being. He believes 'control is a central element in healing. When people enter an institution such as a school or hospital environment they invariably hand over control to somebody else and when ever you can give people back some of that control, it can reduce stress. Stress causes health to deteriorate.'⁸¹ Organiser of the Inaugural National Indigenous Writers Festival, Yaritjji Green, observed when Indigenous writers were given a voice it 'placed them on the map with an historical flourish of creativity, passion and self determination.'⁸²

Professor Mick Dobson from Reconciliation Australia states that 'the message is the same for Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians. We can make our own decisions.'

Oppression seems a strong word to use in contemporary Australia, but its significance is central to the call for morally prepared adults. The consequence of oppression is to stifle or hold back a person or people - manifested as 'cultural dominance.'⁸³ Everyone feels 'humiliated by forced compliance - by the control of others'⁸⁴ because personal integrity, including self-esteem is at stake, aligned with a loss of autonomy and independence.

The symptoms of oppression for a group of people are replicated in individual children. 'The adult who oppresses is an impregnable fortress of recognized authority. The adult is in the right simply by being an adult. For the child to question this would be like attacking the establishment. The thing is beyond dispute! He must adapt himself to everything.

It has been thought legitimate for the adult to offend the child - to judge him, to openly speak ill of him, to hurt his feelings. The child's needs are suppressed by the adult. Protest from the child is considered insubordination and dangerous to tolerate by the all powerful adult.'⁸⁵

It is understandable for children to long for something different – a saviour to rescue them!

⁷⁶ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. Page 71

⁷⁷ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Op. Cit. Page 113

⁷⁸ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Op. Cit. Page 112

⁷⁹ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. Page 71

⁸⁰ Craven, R. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit.

⁸¹ Forbes Report; (August 18 2005) Health and Science. The Sydney Morning Herald. Fairfax Pub.

⁸² Green, Yaritjji. (2005) Statement. Organiser of the Inaugural National Indigenous Writers Festival,

⁸³ Craven, R. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit.

⁸⁴ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Op. Cit. Page 110

⁸⁵ Ibid. Page112 -113



Louisa Sagiba, originally from the Torres Strait Islands reveals, 'My son, 13 years old, asked who was Montessori? We sat down together and I read him a chapter from 'Maria Montessori, Her Life and work!' When I finished, my son said, '**I wish she was my teacher.**'

On the national stage, the Council for Multicultural Australia, established in 2000, defends freedom, respect and fairness for each person. But unfortunately, social equity is far from being realized. Striving toward redressing the balance of power globally, heralds social reform and the evolution of a new era for all humanity!

When can this balance be best addressed?

Undoubtedly, equilibrium is best restored through optimal development of *the young*, and honourable relationships with children in their formative years. Because the child is such an absorber and imitator of life, the quality of the adult is even more critical. Maria Montessori reminds us that 'all the social and moral habits that shape a man's personality, are formed in infancy and remain fixed forever. The child holds a special place.

The child adapts to civilization at the level it has reached when he enters it. The child must then be considered as a point of union, a link joining the different epochs of history.'⁸⁶

'Children are the most important asset in our culture, so society should be structured around this central reality. Instead, we are structuring society around consumerism, and more possessions, for which we run the risk of becoming *impoverished*.'⁸⁷

'Maria Montessori, along with other theorists, viewed their educational work as part of a larger transformation of modern culture – an effort to take us from overwhelming materialism to spiritual values, and from competition and conflict to personal and global peace. We can accomplish this only by rising above our differences and realizing that the inherent basic truth of the spiritual nature of the child is larger than any single perspective or methodology.'⁸⁸

To come full circle, only the spiritually prepared adult is able to set this process in motion.

Importantly, the prepared adult is also in *partnership with the parents* in the important earliest years when personality, character, memory and values are created. Indeed, the spirit of the new adult is desirable from birth as the intense inner life of the 'smallest child needs help and care even when there is little motor or linguistic development. This is a first principle in the education of the family as well as in the school.'⁸⁹

Noel Pearson heads the Cape York Leadership Institute, and he sees that 'families are the starting point to improving life for Aborigines. If families are functioning then they add up to strong communities, not the other way around.'⁹⁰ Many communities who revere the young advocate that it takes a whole village to raise a child. 'Positive role modeling occurs when children see that their parents as adults are learning new skills and becoming active rather than dependent. Education does not *only* imply *schooling* children.'⁹¹

Collaboration.

⁸⁶ Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind Op. Cit. Pg 58

⁸⁷ Sheehan, Paul. (August 15 2005) Editorial Comment. Sydney Morning Herald. Fairfax Pub.

⁸⁸ Wolf, Aline D. (1996) Nurturing the Spirit Parent Child Press PA page 49

⁸⁹ Montessori, Maria. The Child in the Family Op. Cit. page 73

⁹⁰ Pearson, Noel. (July 2005) Newspaper report, Cape York Leadership Institute.

⁹¹ Masterman, Ardyn. Feasibility Report. Op. Cit.



No matter how prepared the non indigenous adult may be coming to an Indigenous community, he or she must rightfully be unassuming and humble in the face of the knowledge of the members of the community. It is important to 'consult local indigenous leaders to form a collaborative partnership.'⁹²

***'Any strategy designed in a spirit of benevolence must pay sensitive attention to the needs, values and aspirations of all those likely to be affected by its outcomes.'*⁹³ Social researcher Hugh Mackay calls it moral mindfulness.**

Teacher Bev Smith, when discussing community consultation, offers advice based on experience, including 'highlighting the positive, avoid focusing on negative aspects, keeping Indigenous parents and community informed, inviting community members to the school, consulting often, becoming involved in the Indigenous community, being a familiar face, holding some gatherings away from the school, attending and/or organizing informal functions in the Indigenous community, and celebrating National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander week.'⁹⁴

Indigenous teachers and assistants have specialized knowledge. They can act as a link to liaise with families, act as language interpreters, are positive role models and are able to help with parent education in cross cultural issues.

Adults prepared to work with Indigenous children must also persist in being 'organised and effective' asserts Don Anderson, Director of Western Cape College, North Queensland.

Don Anderson declares that 'individual teacher accountability has been a high priority and now sits as one of the most important steps forward in Indigenous education in Australia.'⁹⁵

The Montessori model of the prepared adult parallels this view.

The prepared adult must draw upon pedagogical knowledge as well as every humanistic resource to remain accountable and non discriminatory. It is critical to nourish and defend the authenticity of the fact that 'young Aboriginal children have the same developmental needs as those of other groups of children, including the need for security, the use of their senses, the importance of relationships, the need to express feelings in a variety of ways, a sense of curiosity about the world in which they live, and that their needs are best met by hands on activity, as well as particular characteristics developed through their cultural socialization, such as sense of Aboriginal identity, the use of intuition and instinct, the use of non-verbal communication, lack of inhibition, preference to taste and look at things, a sound sense of direction, well developed spatial awareness, well developed visual acuity, and often a reluctance to directly look other people in the eye.'⁹⁶

That said, it is a mistake to assume that Aboriginal children are all the same. 'We tend to assume that all Aboriginal children are alienated and failing in school, but many Aboriginal children come from functional families where education is valued and success has been experienced.'⁹⁷ An advocate for children, Don Anderson remains adamant that educational expectations should not be diluted for indigenous children. 'These children deserve vigour! There is nothing that is unacceptable to share with Aboriginal children that is shared with or expected of all children!'⁹⁸ This includes high standards of numeracy and literacy, which are rights of passage for all children.

Holding low expectations can never be warranted, and contributes to a general dispirited atmosphere and a repressed hierarchical division of power. Every child has the right to learn about

⁹² Craven, R. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit. page 25

⁹³ Mackay, Hugh. 'Right and Wrong' Hodder Pub. 2004

⁹⁴ Smith, Bev Community Consultation: It's essential Teaching Aboriginal Studies page 188

⁹⁵ Anderson, Donald. (2002) A Journey to the Reality of Accountability by Western Cape College Brochure.

⁹⁶ Aboriginal Early Education Report. (July 1995) Education Research Project. Education Department of Western Australia.

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Anderson, Donald, (May 2005) Documented Interview.



his own country's rich cultural heritage and to be challenged to think and act on the social issues of the day. Frank Furedi, a British sociologist addressing the Centre for Independent Studies warns that 'setting our expectations of students so low, does children a grave disservice, denying the capacity of ordinary people to comprehend great ideas and be transformed. We are so intent on immunizing our children from any challenge; we aren't teaching them anything of value.'⁹⁹

The *value* of work for humans of every age is never underestimated by the Montessori prepared adult. Jenny reports that '*responsibility for choice making is helping students prepare for later life and a lot of these children are not good at being responsible – because they have never previously been given the opportunity to be, or expected to be.*'

Having presented background information, some of the strengths of Indigenous people and issues yet to be resolved, and having suggested that the prepared adult is a key component in restoration of certain injustices towards Indigenous children, a summing up is warranted.

Summary

Educational achievement is vitally important for the well being of Aboriginal people and for improvement of their socio economic status. In particular greater recognition and value needs to be placed upon the philosophy, and practices of early childhood education, benefiting young children's overall development.

In our society, we are among those who feel anxious and fearful that the time-honoured sense of reverence has been lost and that morality towards the world's children is in decline.

If genuine respect is lacking children are deemed unworthy, they are ignored, undervalued, held in poor regard, are cheapened, degraded, and shown disdain. It is not a matter of opinion, but truthful reality that children *are* our future. Values transmitted to our young are a way of not only perpetuating positive behaviour and elevated expectations in our society, but also redressing historical and racial inaccuracies.

Of the greatest challenges of this new century is a renewed capacity to empower the mistreated whilst caring for others than ourselves with responsibility and accountability, and this is particularly applicable in Indigenous communities. Our communities of adults and children absolutely depend for their health and stability on the trust and safety *we give to one another*. We aim for a more 'tolerant, equitable, joyous multi cultural Australian society.'¹⁰⁰

Unwieldy systems, large organisations, with inflexible structure relying on hierarchies of people over decades, do not seem to have helped the wellbeing or educational outcomes for Indigenous children.

Could it possibly be that the *conduit* is misleading the well-meaning effort?

What might be a more decent, moral and graceful agent for change?

The answer lies in the transformation of the attitude of the individual so that the adult is no longer an impediment to the child's inherently natural development. It is not only that the 'new' adult is reflective and honorable; it is the *nature of the change* that is so critical for people supporting sustained self esteem in Indigenous communities. The altruistic reforming of the individual may

⁹⁹ Furedi, Frank. (11th August 2005) Report: Miranda Devine 'Why Art is a Dirty word' The Sydney Morning Herald. Fairfax Press.

¹⁰⁰ Craven, R. Teaching Aboriginal Studies Op. Cit. P.24



seem a simplistically under-whelming solution to the serious issues of a nation of people. However the strength of the humble individual far outweighs the influence of the proud individual.

The attitude of the prepared adult allows a psychological shift in the balance of power from an often-authoritarian control to a just and equal footing. Trust and respect must be at the core of every part of the process and the outcome.

The aspiration is to have all Australians walking side by side to create a better future for peoples of our country, free of injustices.

The Montessori prepared adult is able to see what needs to be done, and uses scientific and self-knowledge to commit to respecting all life, protecting and fostering the human spirit of all individuals. The merits of the Montessori prepared adult can not be seen as a 'song based upon a single note.'¹⁰¹

A list of requisite qualities of the Montessori prepared adult offers few areas of contention. Consensus reigns over the worthy virtues of the spiritually prepared adult!

Additional aspects of preparedness of the same adult *in an Indigenous community* must include unreserved sensitivity, acute cultural awareness and a developed consciousness that ensures judgemental attitudes are discarded. One example could concern behavioural patterns. If behaviours exhibited by some Aboriginal children as an outcome of their poor and maybe dysfunctional home backgrounds, are mistakenly labeled as part of their Aboriginality, this amounts to a discriminatory attitude.

Humility, respect and generosity are accepted as fundamental, and the prepared adult's manner, opinions and outlook must be transparent and above reproach.

Indispensable is the wisdom of reason, along with other 'human ways of knowing' such as compassion, creativity, moral intuition, empathy, common sense and imagination. This blend of characteristics allows us to discern morality from the unethical. We 'come to this assumption by integrating what we know with what we feel.' Inner preparation gives us the power to choose to behave well - to be reasonable, respectful, self aware, and act with integrity, but *'the getting of wisdom is a lifelong process.'*¹⁰²

For the practitioner in the field, can the effect of inner preparedness of the adult be translated into a measure of success in Indigenous communities?

The unassuming nature of Joel Rioux offers an insight. *'Success is a strong word. Better to term it 'ideas and actions that have helped some students at some point in their lives.' 'I have seen aggressive behaviours turned into gentle ones, respectful ones. I believe even the most difficult student can be made aware; can be talked to with love. If children turn up to class it is success! If they are happy and safe in class they'll come back. This is success. If the work were not interesting, they'd rather walk the streets... Awareness is success. Such little things; but things that will impact their entire lives! The challenge is to think of all these things that we take for granted, but their parents for example, have not shown them that going out at night impacts on their health, and that they will feel exhausted in the morning. We can't talk of success because there is so much yet to learn about their lives, about them, about their culture of raising children, about food habits. I know I need these pieces of the puzzle to sketch a good plan of action to help me as a teacher to support them better.'*¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Brooks, Geraldine. March Op. Cit. p. 112

¹⁰² Mackay, Hugh. Right and Wrong Op. Cit. page

¹⁰³ Rioux, Joel. Documented Account; Op. Cit.



Joel speaks of children in the second and third planes of development guided by the human tendencies, and having lived through the formative period of their lives. However children born each day, motivated by sensitive periods and gaining information through the power of the absorbent mind, in addition to the human tendencies, are making their debut into the first plane of development and embody a new fresh chance for mankind. These young children in the seminal period of their lives hold great possibilities for humankind – the gift of fresh thought, and unhindered development. As the diversity of the world lies before them, prepared adults must act as their advocates.

In conclusion, if great value is placed on the period of early childhood, and sustained faith in the Aboriginal people, if parents are regarded as partners, if financial investment does not go astray, and is allied with the compassionate strength of the prepared adult, then perhaps we will hear words like Joel, Jenny's, Letitia's and Louisa's reflected through out the land. Louisa says 'I am more confident. I have inner spiritual harmony. I connect with other humans differently than before. I have patience, and courtesy. It's a new word for my family.'¹⁰⁴

Speaking of her Indigenous students, Jenny Rioux reveals that *'despite the complexities in their lives they form a special bond with you, a trusting, loving, bond like that of two friends who really care about each other. They touch you to the core of your existence and when you see their beautiful smiles and laughter you just feel so happy too. Most importantly I love to see their success, their achievements, their progress and their confidence develop as a result of the Montessori materials and prepared environment. It is the most rewarding teaching position I have ever experienced in 13 years of teaching.'*

Whilst travelling throughout Cape York some observations and discussions were discouraging. Balanced against and far outweighing the disheartening occurrences were the uplifting, joyous successful experiences that were the direct result of seeing the qualities of the prepared adults in action. This key to success can create a new vision within Indigenous and non Indigenous communities alike. Scientifically, spiritually and morally prepared adults may be likened to passionate composers, capable of writing harmonies and dancing with others to the tune!

¹⁰⁴ Sagiba, Louisa. Documented Interview. Op. Cit.



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