



Montessori in an Indigenous Community

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Introduction

Jennifer and I live and work, in Woorabinda (Woorie as we say here), a small indigenous community with a population of approximately 1000 inhabitants, 170km South West of Rockhampton, Central Queensland. "Wadja Wadja High School" (where we work) is the only independent indigenous high school in Australia. We accepted the challenge this year of trying to apply the Montessori universal principles to our indigenous classrooms. We were hired for two main reasons; because of our Montessori training and knowledge and also because of our experience with primary age students. The students at Wadja Wadja (in both our classes) are aged 13 to 14 years old and unfortunately, the high school students are at a lower primary academic level (cycle 2/6-9 year old).

Reality is that some of these young characters and young minded students come to school bare foot, arrive late in the morning, after 9 (sometimes at 9:30), some with empty stomachs and exhausted from their nightly walk around town. Also, sometimes, the students might leave school for weeks or months due to travelling to see their relatives. Another fact that is different to other schools we've taught at is that teachers don't really interact with the parents unless there is a major concern with a student, therefore, the link between the students, the school and home is rather weak. It is also important to remember that by simply keeping some of the students in our school environment, we are achieving something. Sometimes I put quiet bird sounds on the tape recorder and this seems to help them start the day peacefully as they recognize some of the chirpings. I leave my didgeridoo (collected from surrounding bush) in a corner for the students to use after their work. Jenny often starts her day by playing the guitar and singing softly. Gladly enough, some of her students now have an interest and are asking for guitar lessons. The students speak several languages; some standard Australian English but their oral vocabulary bank (in Australian standard English) is perhaps "grosso modo" 300 words. They also speak Aboriginal English (e.g. where he is sir? Who he is miss?) and Woorabinda creole (e.g. "oberdela" meaning "over there"! There seems to also be a small amount of traditional language (before the English language settled: e.g. migloo/non Aboriginal, murri/Aboriginal). These are like remnants of the many indigenous languages of their forebears. Perhaps, it's as if all languages are overlapping due to the fact that Woorabinda was originally founded by many different tribes from all over Queensland in 1927. The staff at Wadja Wadja is working on a few fronts; to reinforce the students' knowledge of reading, writing, arithmetic, to raise attendance, to diminish the use of inappropriate language and improve manners. Grace and courtesy lessons can be of help like in any Montessori classroom. Here, out in the scrub, let's admit it, this is a vulnerable community!

HOWEVER, we had some revelations/epiphanies in recent weeks. The positives of working in such a community are incommensurable. We feel extremely blessed to be having this experience on both a personal and professional level! The ambiance is relaxed and if you care for the well being of the students, they will show affection. They are truly honest, they laugh a lot even though there may be

some affliction within the families and there are no egos involved. They share everything they have unconditionally at all times with friends (pies, drinks, pencils, anything). They also like to share their knowledge and passion for the natural environment with us. They are proud to tell us stories told by their families (Dreamtime stories) and also of their own experiences with hunting and travelling. Out here, in Central Queensland, TV's, videos, computers, game boy or play station do not control student's life. In fact, TV is the only distraction at home. They would much rather be up the street playing cricket with mates or down the creek fishing for yabbies (croychies as they say here) or better still, riding horses – bareback – in the bush and through the village streets! As a result, all of the above makes "Woorie" a "deadly" (meaning great) place to live and makes us appreciate life and nature billions of times more!

A dramatic feast for the eyes in a harsh land!

Not far from Woorabinda, we find coal and sapphire mines as well as citrus, sunflower and cotton fields. The land is peppered with magnificent boab trees, grass trees and early forms of plants such as cycads which appeared way before the dinosaurs, according to scientists. Along the way to Woorabinda, we are greeted by such a divine spectrum of colours, ochre from dirt tracks branching off the main sealed road on cloudless days. Olive green, light and dark green leaves, grilled hills, shades of orange, brown and yellow backgrounds, pale yellow with a scorching endless sun. All of a sudden, a billabong springs out of nowhere with peaceful and majestic purple water lilies with resting Magpie geese on their migration road. Sulphur crested cockatoos screech happily up high where the cones sit in the pine trees. Huge grey stumps lay here, there, and everywhere. Burnt black stems of eucalyptus trees with contrasting green leaves and just beside, untouched by the fire, standing tall, white trunks of gum trees. Horses roam freely without fences. Children ride them, any time they like in the small village. The feeling of freedom and the smiles on their faces are priceless! White female Brahman cows that can tolerate the burning sun come out of the bush with their male partners (greyish white) which have a huge hump on their back! For our daily walk in town, we are greeted by the happy faces of small children with white teeth and chocolate skin. Whistling kites circle and sweep the area constantly while pink breasted cockatoos (galahs) and the beautifully coloured yellow and blue eastern rosellas sing around the trees. After school, it is divine to escape in the bush and hear the silence to meditate or simply read quietly. If you are quiet, you may be greeted by a dingo, an emu or a kangaroo! Let's not forget the night sky that is illuminated like something we've never seen before!

Curriculum and Physical Environment

We have organized shelves around the room, in the same fashion as any Montessori classroom. The carpenter is just about to make another one for the language home made materials we offer. We have nice small bamboo baskets where we have erasers, pencils, scissors, rulers, sewing activities and also a basket of virtues simply illustrated and



easily understood. Available to the students are charcoal pencils, sketching graphic pencils, water colour, oil pastels, ink with little corella feathers we've collected on an outing, and coloured pencils for decorating their project books. Reading corners (early readers indigenous collections and others) are a part of our rooms and soon, hopefully, we'll have the Sunshine/Galaxy series-natural sciences. We have a display table with cultural activities and classified nomenclature for the students to choose. With the help of an expert indigenous artist, the students do painting twice a week in the art room. The school bus takes the students to the village stadium (gymnasium) where we play cricket, rugby or basketball twice a week. On a hot day, we swim at the pool next door. We even took the students to the creek for sketching. Every Friday is dedicated to bush expeditions around the "Woorie" community land managed by the Aboriginal council which is 52,000 acres wide. We sit at lush creeks and waterholes for swimming, fishing or canoeing. We went "walkabout" for trees hollowed by the termites from which to make didgeridoos and clap sticks as well as hunting for echidnas, goannas, and kangaroos. These experiences become classroom language lessons as we do recounts with the students of all the steps involved in the process. We don't even need fishing or hunting permits out here! "Just gammon with you fellas"!

The main framework of our curriculum revolves around the Great Fables and extension work, but adapted to the students to the best of our abilities. As strongly recommended during my Montessori training in Bergamo, during term 1, I did the story of the universe and the creation of the Earth (Geography series of 60 charts), I was busy working with chart 1a-6a (formation of the Earth) and the related activities as well as the work for the study of water (charts 6-25). I also offered the parts of the volcano classified nomenclature. For term 2 - we are doing the story of the coming of life on Earth (characteristics of the 5 classes of vertebrates) and zoology classified nomenclature as well as Botany work/series of 19 botany charts and related classified nomenclature (flowers, roots). During this term, we will greet a horticulture expert who is coming to the village and at the end of the course a certificate will be presented to the students. Term 3 will follow the story of the coming of early humans (3.3m. chart) and term 4, the story of the alphabet (plus early civilizations), story of numbers and story of the Great River (human anatomy).

The family is so important to the indigenous people. Trips to visit the relatives around Queensland (South/North) are common. We can use their knowledge and interests for the study of Queensland but I feel their awareness outside Queensland is rather weak, luckily though, we can help with the work called "Study of the child's own nation" in our Geography albums.

For the study of Mathematics, we have laser copies of some charts of the memorization work and I made my own stamp game with coloured cardboard and hierarchical coloured bowls. We have gathered MAB blocks around the school and bought some more for the presentations of the concepts of +, -, x, ÷ and I have made my own set of the symbol cards. We have a humongous metallic squared board that we found at school and we use it as a 100 board and for skip counting. We prepared operation cards in hierarchical colours to reinforce their knowledge and we have dyed pop sticks green, blue and red for divisions (1 and 2 divisors). We also used them for memorization of division (combinations) in their booklets. We have all laser copies of the plane figures of the geometry cabinet and we have drawn on coloured cardboard the constructive triangles. We also have the matching name labels of the triangles, polygons, quadrilaterals and the figures of the oval family. I now have a dilemma about the geometry sticks! Suggestions anyone? We ordered the geometric solids from MTA (Modern Teaching Aids) and we discarded the odd ones. We painted them during an art session with indigenous designs. We only have one missing solid (the ovoid). We put some solid nets on the shelves and a bingo solid game we had. We have all the necessary commercial material required (coins, bills, clocks and picture labels, fraction games, measuring cylinder material for volume study, scale and weights, volume and length cards question game, etc.). Finally, home made Montessori material called "International Metric system classified nomenclature" is also left available for the students to choose.

In the language shelf corner, we feel the high priority for now should be their knowledge of *basic sight words* as well as *diagraphs/phonograms*. To complete the trilogy, we offer *cultural vocabulary* in botany, zoology, geography, physics, chemistry and history. The home-made material called "Orthography through pictures" will come in handy soon. Grammar work has been presented (article, adjective, noun and verb so far). We have bought local familiar animals (plastic kangaroos, echidna, and parrots) to entice them to write and label their parts of speech. Usual word and sentence reading level activities are also present on the shelves (e.g. action mime red basket/verb, adjective paper game, word study charts, etc.) and numerous sound matching activities are available. Sight spelling words are made easy with a fishing rod game (with paper clips on each one of them). Many activities such as learning to draw animals, chalk and small boards, punctuation cards sit on the shelves. Project books, word study books, spelling folders and handwriting books are done, as often as we possibly can.

How do the students respond to The Montessori Universal principles?

We are happily surprised so far! First of all, we are very interested in people understanding people... and the students seem to be responding well to the Montessori approach. We provide materials when students are ready and we build on their knowledge sequentially, in order to support them to succeed as our number one priority is to protect their self-esteem and nurture their self-confidence as these students are vulnerable and afraid of making mistakes.

At all the Montessori conferences we have attended, all through our career, we have heard so much about the Montessori philosophy, the vision and the Montessori Universal principles of life. Our question of departure was "Is Montessori really as Universal as what the experts say?" Yes, the student is universal and he/she has the same characteristics and potentialities (or human tendencies) irrespective of time and space. This indigenous experience in "Woorie", helps us to look deeper into the Montessori principles. Jenny and I often discuss tirelessly the vision and human tendencies of orientation and exploration, of work, beauty, order, communication, concentration, love, spirituality, and the need to aspire to a higher level of independence. Everyone on Earth has the need to develop more and more peace within. This experience allows us to validate and witness all of these and to confirm these ideas we've heard/read so many times in Montessori literature or at conferences.

It sounds slightly strange to say that this year for us; it is a *hands on approach with the vision (with the Montessori universal principles)* as the Montessori materials in our classroom are limited to only home made material (as we are waiting on Nienhuis apparatus). We live Montessori this year as a non-materialistic vision for the first time!

We use our Montessori reflexes acquired during our many years of experience, for instance, we always offer students choices of activities and try to entice them with our attractive environments. We keep in mind the skeleton of the Montessori approach where we are aiming for the valorisation of the personality, allowing them to work at their own pace, developing concentration, developing a strong and well coordinated will, offering an intelligent love, allowing movement to occur, considering the work of the hand (instrument of intelligence), keeping good observation records, etc. Jenny and I have discussions on a new level this year, meaning at all times, we have to keep in mind where the students come from, whether they have eaten or not and try to understand how their cultural, social and family life influence their daily performances. Basically, we stick to what we feel is working the most efficiently for us even though this is not an easy task!

We offer Freedom to choose their work, to sit where they want, to work for as long as they want, freedom to express themselves. We offer Respect; respect for the physical environment, for the natural environment, respect for others and for ourselves. Through the freedom we allow them, they can become more responsible for their learning. The more Responsibility we can offer the students, the more Independence they can achieve. By allowing them to be responsible, indirectly we are

showing that we trust them to make choices that are appropriate for their own needs and abilities. The results are Self-esteem and Peace within.

Where to go from now?

One of our immediate aims is to seek some financial avenues to buy Nienhuis apparatus. Firstly, what Jenny and I feel we need to do is to study well David Kahn's document called "The Montessori Adolescent: Analysis in Retrospect" and look at the characteristics and the needs of the Adolescent to really understand what the students are about. There exists also other interesting papers such as the one presented at "The Adolescent Colloquium" in October 1996 in Cleveland, OH by Camillo Grazzini and Baiba Kruminis (Special Grazzini-NAMTA Journal/Winter 2004).

We also need to learn about their culture, the way they live at home and the way they think and relate to one another. There is a long road ahead of us but we feel we can probably adapt some of the blueprint to the indigenous community. Let's dream we can offer the students an education based on economics and moral independence one day, where an agricultural education and self-regulating system is in place! Let's dream of offering the students a physical environment adapted to their needs and abilities. I have no doubt, here in our little community, we can pull together all those needed experts (horticulture, woodwork, agriculture, business, etc.). Everywhere, people always want to help and everyone is skilled in one area or another. Woorabinda offers only a small selection of job prospects for these young minds after high school, therefore the need to act is right now. Through Montessori, we believe the vision can empower them to greater heights for their future!

Anyone passing by is welcome to visit us and to help us support this beautiful indigenous community! Any Montessori materials donations would be highly appreciated or any technical support and/or any contact you may have. Contact Joel and Jennifer at kundun@optusnet.com.au

Thank you indigenously!

Joel and Jennifer Rioux

