

MONTESSORI  
CHILDREN'S  
FOUNDATION



## ABOUT the Torres Strait Project

The Torres Strait Nation has embraced Montessori education as a vehicle through which to achieve a long-held vision of autonomy. This nation, home to one of Australia's two Indigenous peoples, has recognised a natural synergy between the Montessori approach and its own traditional practices. Both acknowledge the pivotal role of the child in building a stronger future for the wider society.

With the support of MCF and a team of dedicated Montessorians, a number of early years education programs now operate across the Torres Strait, including: three 3-6 classes, six parent and infant services and a long day care centre. Operated by Tagai State College and YUMI Education Inc., a community-based organisation, these programs are governed and staffed, in the main, by Torres Strait Islanders.

MCF's role in the Torres Strait has been to work in

partnership with the college and community organisations to build sustainable models of program delivery. MCF has focused on genuine community engagement and ownership, supporting the training of local people and establishing robust systems of quality control.

These partnerships are now celebrated widely on both the national and international stage. MCF and Torres Strait leaders are regularly asked to share their story at education and Indigenous forums across the country and around the world.

The incredible success of MCF's partnerships with the Torres Strait Nation over the past five years has resulted in plans for a further expansion of Montessori programs. Leaders from across the region have articulated their vision of establishing the first Montessori Nation in which all children in the Torres Strait have access to a Montessori education in their first six years of life.

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# The Torres Strait Journey

In 2009, a Montessori 3–6 class was established at the Thursday Island campus of Tagai State College following a long period of consultation with the community. The program, which came to be known as Kaziw Mudh (Children's House), allowed families a choice of kindergarten programs, a Montessori environment or the general state school pre-primary curriculum.

In 2010, the Torres Strait Islanders' Regional Education Council (TSIREC) opened a parent and infant service on Thursday Island targeting children from birth to three years and their families. Promoted under the name Strait Start, it combines a playgroup with parent education activities and applies the Montessori 0-3 curriculum, with outreach visits to family homes.

By 2011, wide community support led Tagai State College to expand its Montessori programs on Thursday Island, opening a second 3-6 class and adding a 6-9 program. In the same year, MCF supported two experienced teachers to undertake the AMI Preschool course on the Sunshine Coast. Both went on to graduate as qualified Montessori teachers in 2013.

Also in 2011, the Strait Start program expanded to an additional six communities: Badu, Kubin, Boigu, Poruma, Erub and Iama. The staff for these programs were recruited locally in order to capitalise on their knowledge of the culture and community networks. They completed an AMI Assistants Certificate Course in Brisbane. Most also went on to participate in the AMI Assistants to Infancy course in Sydney over 2011 and 2012, with four later graduating with the full diploma.

In 2012 the Strait Start program on Iama (Yam Island) was transformed into the region's first licenced Montessori childcare centre. The long day care service was named Iama Migi Kaziw Mudh ("Yam Island Little Children's House") and was established to work with children aged from 18 months to four years.

In December 2012, Tagai State College had to close the 6-9 program on Thursday Island due to resourcing issues. Subsequent community forums clearly illustrated an ongoing demand for Montessori primary programs and will inform future planning.

Today, Montessori programs across the Torres Strait continue to operate successfully. Active parent support groups continue to advocate for an expansion of the programs into other communities and into primary years of schooling. The training and development of Torres Strait Islander staff is working to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project.

Despite the region's unquestioning enthusiasm for Montessori early years programs, their establishment has not come without challenges. The remoteness of the communities, for example, is a barrier to staff accessing training and imposes significant freight and travel costs on general operational activities. Embedding Montessori programs into a state-run schooling system has also presented a number of operational issues, such as implementing the three hour work cycle and accessing suitable relief staff.

MCF continues to work with local leaders to identify long-term solutions and to ensure the ongoing success of the programs.

## SUPPORT the Montessori Children's Foundation

There are many ways you can support the ongoing work of MCF in the Torres Strait:

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