Celebrating a century of Montessori in Australia
IN THIS ISSUE
This edition celebrates 100 years of Montessori in Australia which culminated in the Montessori Centenary Conference in Canberra on 8 & 9 June. As our nations capital celebrated their own centenary, Montessorians from around the country came together at Old Parliament House to take stock of our history and our successes over the past 100 years. We celebrated in style at a Gala Ball at Parliament House and reflected on our standing in today’s world. This year also provided the opportune time to launch a new book “Montessori: The Australia Story” by Dr Susan Feez. Commissioned by the Montessori Australia Foundation, the book charts our rich history and can be purchased from the online Montessori Books store at www.montessoribooks.com.au

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Montessori Insights is an annual magazine especially for Montessori parents. Our aim is to provide interesting, thought-provoking and relevant articles about Montessori education and philosophy.
It was my privilege to attend the launch of the remarkable achievement that is the Montessori Centenary history book, Montessori: The Australian Story, written by Dr Susan Feez.

When the Montessori Australia Foundation (MAF) was given the opportunity to launch the book at the University of South Australia we were extremely pleased and honoured.

The Montessori Australia Foundation is delighted and proud to have commissioned this book in our centenary year. The long and remarkable history of Montessori in Australia is a tribute to the people who were so dedicated to supporting our children.

This book is a remarkable piece of research work and will provide an enduring document for education students and historians alike.

We should really begin by firstly thanking Dr Maria Montessori and then acknowledge those four Australian kindergarten teachers who travelled to Rome to attend the first international Montessori training course in Rome – Harriett Barton, Ruby Starling and sisters Rhoda and Norma Selfe. No mean achievement in those days. You will read much about their experience and influence on Australian education in the book.

The story chronicled in the book could never be a complete record of all Australian Montessori schools, all Australian Montessori educators and all Australian children who have attended Montessori schools, much less the many hundreds of Australian benefactors and volunteers who have supported Montessori education over the years.

It is instead offered as a first account of the Montessori work undertaken in this country over the last century. The hope is that it might be a starting point, inspiring Australian Montessorians in each state and territory to colour in the detail, perhaps following the lead of the Canberra Montessori Society who published their story in an illustrated book written by Marion McEwin and Margaret Fleming in 2006 or, perhaps more fittingly for the 21st century, by creating an online illustrated archive that can be updated as the years go by.

Unfortunately space did not permit us to detail all the inspiring stories of commitment and hard work at the heart of Montessori education in Australia nor to feature all the amazing teachers and parents involved. However, we will be placing detailed histories of many schools and other information along with wonderful photographs on the MAF website next year.

We have many people to thank. Our thanks go to the Selfe family descendants: Rosalind Maybanke Strong, Emeritus Professor Christine Deer and Patricia Spring, to Dr Bob Petersen, an educational historian formerly of the University of Sydney and the inspirational foundational work of the late Dr Dan O’Donnell. I know that Fiona Campbell and Dr Lesley Payne also deserve special thanks for their assistance to Susan.

We are indebted to the UNSW Press and our editor, Marie-Louise Taylor. For those who contributed your stories, your photos and your time, our most sincere thanks. Thanks also to Penelope McMillan for making this event possible.

I have left the most important acknowledgement and thanks to last. There really was no other choice to write this book. As we say in the preface to the book, Susan has been dogged and devoted, articulate and astute. Her passion for research and commitment to conveying the heart of the stories comes across on every page. Susan has indeed earned her own special place in our Montessori history and in our hearts.

Montessori: An Australian Story

The Montessori Australia Foundation would like to thank Kerry Black, Accademia di Montessori, for her help in organising the book launch. Here is her account of the day. Montessori: The Australian Story can be purchased from montessori books at www.montessoribooks.com.au for $59.95.

“Just this should be the task of history: to reveal this other aspect of the life of Man, to illustrate his cosmic task, to throw light on the action he unconsciously performs on the planet where he spends the brief years of his life”

[Dr Maria Montessori, 1948]
The government, of which I’m a part, recognises, respects and applauds your achievements, and I thought the best way of doing that was to come and be here in a formal sense to make this opening address and to communicate that to you directly.

So, it is a privilege for me to be here to celebrate 100 years of contribution made by the Montessori Movement to educating Australians, to acknowledge, not only here, but also internationally, the extraordinary range of alumni from Montessori education and to recognise the contribution that they have made in all the corners of the earth.

It’s also a great pleasure for me to be back in Canberra talking about education in what has been a really historic week where the Lower House of the Australian Parliament has now passed the Australian Education Bill and for those of you who have been following this closely, this is a single moment in our education history, one which can in no way be underestimated. Although we’ve got a small way to go, it’s still got to get through the Senate (which has a mind of its own), it’s an achievement that we are particularly proud of and I want to make reference to that this morning.

It’s an historic occasion for Montessori education in Australia. There’s much here to be proud of and you know, better than I, how the Montessori Movement began in Italy, as we heard, in 1907. Dr Montessori, Italy’s first female medical doctor, commencing the program in Rome, remarkable results and attracting the attention of educators around the world.

Now Australia’s always been a nation of early adopters so perhaps it’s not surprising that only 5 years later, a small group of Australia women travelled to Italy to be trained by Dr Montessori. After their training, returned and of course by 1913, Montessori education was up and running in Australia.

Fast forward to today, upwards of 240 Montessori programs across Australia, early learning centres, independent schools, in the public sector, in cities, in rural and in remote communities.

I think it’s worth saying in this point in time, that one of what we might describe as a stereotype about Montessori education that’s sometimes held, just simply isn’t the case.

I know that the Montessori Children’s Foundation supports early years projects in Indigenous and remote communities throughout Australia. We’ve got Ned David here who knows this well. Programs in places as far flung as Aurukun, and Pompumaaw in Cape York, Thursday Island and Kiwirrkurra in Western Australia, empowering both children and adults through education and I have to say that I am guessing that I’m one of a handful of people in this room who’s actually been to Kiwirrkurra and who knows exactly where it is and I can tell you there is no more remote community in this continent. None more remote, and to be clear, probably none more, bearing the weight of disadvantaged and disenfranchisement from their land and their community. So I do want to recognise the achievements of Montessori in providing the opportunities for people in those parts of our country to be influenced by, and have the impact of Montessori education as well.

There is no doubt that much of Dr Montessori’s cutting edge of thinking in education and childhood development in her time is something which is valued and utilised today. Not only in the Montessori system, of course there it is most evident: individualised learning, child sized environment, materials (and of course I saw them on the way in), the importance of creativity, communication, collaboration and innovation.

These are going to be increasingly important skills for young people in all school systems as we marshal the best of our human capacities to meet the very big challenges ahead of us in this 21st century.
We know that Dr Montessori was always a strong advocate for the importance of children for the future of society. You heard that reflected in Christine’s comments. That tradition I know is robustly maintained today. The understanding that every child deserves to be well educated and of course Montessori leading the way in areas such as education for children with disability, understanding the power of education in replacing ‘disadvantage’ with ‘potential’.

In fact I see some pretty direct parallels between the times and vision of Dr Montessori and the debate about school education that we’ve been having in this country today. Because Australia and its students face a range of challenges and opportunities in a time when the digital age, the age of century, are well and truly upon us. In the custom of the 20th century we might say that Dr Montessori seemed to sense that children of that time would face times like no other and she was right, and the catastrophe of two world wars, a cold war, the arrival of the atomic age to the success of civil rights and various movements and times of big opportunities and opportunities and increasing wealth driven by advances and trade and technology.

In these early days of the 21st century, I think here our children again face challenges and there are some immense ones – dangerous climate change. How do we as a society best look after and afford to take care of, a rapidly aging and growing aging population? But of course, tremendous opportunities in careers in trade, and I know His Excellency will reflect this as well, as the centre of global economic and political activity shifts towards Asia, particularly with those large countries in our region, China and India.

We can’t really imagine what the future holds for today’s children but what we can do is do what Dr Montessori did, and that’s take a whole, holistic and refreshed approach to ensuring that our children learn, learn the ability to adapt and develop that passion and enthusiasm for learning right through school and beyond.

I think there’s one of the proud traditions of Montessori, both around the globe and here in Australia, and that it’s all so central to what we’re doing as we work to achieve a national plan for school improvement.

Here, what we’re saying, is that in supporting a national plan for school improvement, we want to give support to all students so that they have the means to prosper and to make sure that every single student, in our country, has access to the best educational opportunities. It doesn’t matter where they live and it shouldn’t matter what the means of their families or their parents or carers are.

Of course, this government has respected the right of parents to choose the education model that best suits their children’s needs. And our investments, which have been really big, have been sector blind across the government and the non government school sectors, and I think that’s why it’s important to recognise that the National Plan for School Improvement, (it came about as you all know, as results of the Gonski Review Recommendations to school funding), is all about focusing on the importance of parents, families and schools, working together to support young people to do their best and aimed at providing investment into schools, regardless of whether they are small or large, government or non government, based on the needs of the students in the schools. So for us that’s particularly important and just to reaffirm again, so is parents’ involvement in their kids’ education. It is an integral part of the National Plan for School Improvement and we want to see it rolled out right around Australia.

We know that Australia needs reforms. The reason for that is that education stasis or decline, nationally, in the results of our young Australians in terms of their literacy and numeracy accomplishments and in scientific literacy and mathematical literacy as well. We know that they are the building blocks for education irrespective of what decisions in life a child takes about their learning or their future career. So it’s especially important now, for us, that all states and territories and the nongovernment sector get on board.

What else did I want to say to you today? I wanted to say that we’re driven by a fundamental belief, which I’ve brought to the portfolio, that we need to make sure that there is a learning entitlement, as there is a citizenship entitlement, for all young Australian students to get the best possible education they can and access to the best possible education as well. And so we do believe, after a period of extraordinary activity in education over the last 5½ years, that the National Plan for School Improvement is the final component in setting us up for the future. We can only be a successful nation if our children have the best possible education. I think we all are well aware of that but we need to have the mechanisms in place to enable us to do that.

Just as Dr Montessori stood then on the cusp of a new century and delivered an education revolution that has impacted on the way that children are taught in schools right around the world, so we too stand facing a future of some uncertainty but considerable opportunity. There’s no question that the work that we’re doing, as a government, with schools and systems around Australia, does provide a once in a lifetime opportunity to lay the foundations for future sustainable prosperity and to liberate the gifts and the talents of every young Australian wherever they may be.

Having said all of that, it’s my very great pleasure to say that I’m here to officially open this extremely important conference. To commend, recognise and acknowledge the contribution that Montessori education has made in Australia. To thank everybody involved. To say to you that your recognition of the creative, imaginative, innovative, nurturing and caring dimensions that are both reflected in the way that children are taught but also of course are reflected more broadly in the contribution that they make, in their family life in their work and in their community and further afield is of immense benefit to our nation.

I hope your next 100 years will be as successful as your first 100 years and we very much look forward to seeing you continue in this progress, in terms of educating young Australian children.
When we look back on 106 years of Montessori history, it is good to ponder upon the immense popularity of Montessori education, when it was perceived as excitingly new and different. Dr Maria Montessori’s first book “The Montessori Method”, published in 1909, hit the educational world like a thunderclap, resounding all around the world, even in Sydney, Australia. In August 1912, educator Martha Simpson was already establishing an experimental Montessori class in Sydney at the Blackfriars Kindergarten Practising School. In the book “Montessori: The Australian Story” Dr Susan Feez writes about how Martha Simpson travelled to Rome in 1913 to meet Dr Montessori and spent two months there learning all she could.

Four Australians attended the first International Montessori Training Course in Rome in 1913. At the State Library of NSW, Susan arranged to retrieve and study the family papers of two of these Australian sisters, Rhoda and Norma Selfe. These historical documents included the transcribed lectures and lessons from this first Montessori training course. It reveals that those who participated in the course attended three lessons a week, two lectures and one practical lesson, given by Dr Montessori herself. The introductory lecture was delivered during a welcome reception organised by Dr Montessori’s great friend and supporter, Marchesa Maria Maraini Guerieri-Gonzaga, and held at the grand house of the Marchesa de Viti de Marco. Present at the reception, held on 15 January, were the Ambassadors of the United States and Great Britain, as well as the Italian Ministers of Public Instruction and of the Colonies. The subject of this lecture was: General review of the Montessori method as introducing a new experimental science. The remaining lectures and technical lessons were delivered at Dr Montessori's home in the Via Principessa Clotilde, overlooking the Piazza del Popolo.

From an Australian viewpoint our Montessori was kicked off by Miss Martha Simpson from Blackfriars School in Chippendale. She returned to Australia after the course and developed a thoroughgoing Montessori program at Blackfriars Montessori School. This school attracted much attention and interest. Reputedly, she worked tirelessly and with great influence until her death in 1938.

I had always imagined that Martha Simpson was pretty much a lone Montessori voice during this time: Susan’s research reveals that this was anything but the case. Australians and Australian practice were surprisingly visible and influential in the Montessori firmament of the day. Martha Simpson seems to have been highly respected by Dr Montessori, apparently the Dottoressa as they referred to her, gave tacit approval for Martha Simpson to run her own Montessori training in Sydney, something that she did not approve or tolerate outside the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) mandate anywhere else in the world.

Martha Simpson’s influence spread to other states including Tasmania, Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia. She was made an Inspector of Schools and promoted the integration of many Montessori principles into teaching practice throughout NSW.

Martha Simpson was a great Montessorian, but, with her death, serious momentum was lost. I think of this period as equivalent to a Great Ice Age for Montessori in Australia: it lasted for about 25 years. Little is heard of Montessori in Australia until the 1960s and 70s.

Dr Montessori was active throughout the intervening period, although World War II saw her exiled from Italy due to her anti-Fascist views and interned with her son, Mario Senior, in India as an (Italian) enemy alien. She wrote a lot and still ran training courses while in India and at the conclusion of the war returned to Holland, which was to be her home until she died.

From this new energy and optimism arising in the post-war era, the message was carried by educators who had studied with Dr Montessori in post WWII, particularly in Holland. Some of the notables were: Mrs Willemien Duyker-De Vries who started her Montessori School in Western Australia in 1962.

In Melbourne, Mrs Jean Kalker acted as the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) representative in Australia and was instrumental in starting schools in Melbourne. I have met both of those grand ladies and I have great admiration for their work.
Susan’s book, however, provides much more detail on Mrs Duyker’s journey than I was ever aware of. It is a remarkable story, with the school celebrating its 50th Anniversary in 2012 and has every right to be regarded as one of the major foundation blocks of Montessori in Australia.

However, when I arrived back in Australia from the UK in 1980 it still felt as though we were a tiny, scattered Montessori tribe. By that time, of course, there were established schools in most of the capital cities. I was in Perth when the Montessori Society of WA was formed, I came to live in Canberra a year later to find that the Canberra Montessori Society had already established two schools there, and of course quite a bit was happening in Sydney at the time.

Most of the qualified teachers at this time had trained overseas in Europe, North America or the Indian sub-continent. There was a desperate shortage of qualified teachers, and there was strong urging to run an AMI Training Course in Australia. Again, I refer you to Susan’s book for the weight of historical detail she provides regarding the spread of Montessori in each individual state in the chapter “Parents, Vision and a Church Hall”.

There was no escaping, however, the fact that Montessori growth will always grind to a halt if the challenge of providing a suitable supply of qualified Montessori educators cannot be overcome. This is a universal problem and is not limited to how we can get more trained Montessori educators as there is considerable dispute about the type of training that they have. This has been a source of strong feeling and even drama. For instance, it is interesting to read of the rumbles back in Blackfriars days where Susan’s research reveals that when Norma and Rhoda Selfe disagreed with the interpretation of Montessori pedagogy at Blackfriars, they opened their own private Montessori school at Ashfield. Later Norma Selfe took up a teaching position at Havilah Children’s Home where she again was sole director of the Montessori kindergarten for the many years she worked there. Some educators argued that their correspondence course had done ‘more than anything else to spread the Montessori ideas and to help people get new schools started’. AMI, however, did not support the training of Montessori teachers through correspondence, a stance it maintained to this day. Instead, in the years after Dr Montessori’s death, AMI concentrated its energy on establishing around the world, in the professional presence of Montessori Trainers helped via mentoring and the MTCA finally imploded in the mid 1990s. Candice Shields is located and recruit sufficient students to undertake the training courses to a Montessori training centre. They recognised that training by correspondence ‘isn’t as good as coming to lectures and working with other students, but half a loaf is better than no bread’. Now independent of AMI, the two women travelled widely giving lectures and workshops for those taking part in the correspondence course. The correspondence course became extremely popular internationally including in Australia, particularly in Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria. The Montessori World Education Institute (MWEI) continues today, offering a Diploma course, an Advanced Certificate and a Graduate Diploma Course in Montessori Studies.

On the eastern seaboard in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the vision called for AMI Training. The Sydney Montessori Teachers’ College (SMTC) was established because ‘schools were becoming increasingly weary of the struggle and immigration process to find, secure and bring overseas Montessori teachers to Australia’. The group working to set up the SMTC included Pamela Shaw, one of the four mothers who had founded the Sydney Montessori Society in 1974, Sue Birdsell, Tineke van Gasselt, Christine Harrigan and Paul Seijbel. Other supporters, who became members of the Academic Board of the SMTC, included Professor Martin Cooper of the University of New South Wales, Paula Ginnis of the NSW Department of Education, Pat and Barry Hilson and Lily Kuruvita. Reviving the 70-year old link between the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College (SKTC) and Montessori education in Australia, the Board of the SMTC also included SKTC lecturers, Dr Laurie le Claire and Dr Jean Spearritt.

Much work and lobbying was done by Sue Birdsell and others from the NSW Montessori Association and eventually, Elizabeth Hall came out from USA in 1983 to run the first 3-6 Course in a church hall in Longueville with Kathy Kelley as the first Course Assistant. My late wife, Patricia Hilson, joined her as Course Assistant as she commenced her Training of Trainer’s program. Hildegard Solzbacher and Nikki Hughes also came from the USA to lead and support in subsequent courses prior to Pat becoming the first Australian Director of Training.

Of course, the local training had a major positive impact. In addition to launching AMI graduates into the growing number of schools, the professional presence of Montessori Trainers helped via mentoring and school consultations. The original SMTC morphed into the Montessori Teachers College of Australia (MTECA) with a view to opening the training to a national presence rather than the Sydney-centric image it had initially acquired. I remember that it was always a struggle to locate and recruit sufficient students to undertake the training courses in Sydney and one in Melbourne. In all, it was a tenuous existence, and the MTECA finally imploded in the mid 1990s. Candice Shields is quoted in the book as observing ‘the closure of the MTECA proved to be a huge setback for AMI training in Australia’.
There was considerable acrimony generated within the Montessori community over the funding issues that resulted in the closure of the College. In July of 1996 the Director of Training, Patricia Hilson, died, after a long illness. This left Australia without an AMI Director of Training, and no AMI training centre. Ill feeling over the closure of the College was unresolved and many people who had been inspired by Patricia Hilson were saddened and feeling leaderless.

It was not long before a new initiative was established that was ultimately to develop into the Australian Montessori Teacher Education Foundation (AMTEF) and Shannon Helfrich came out from USA to run the first of several courses. We were very fortunate to have Pamela Nunn and Amy Kirkham into the 3-6 Training of Trainers Program and they now have several courses under their belts as Directors of Training.

Later, when we managed to get Dr Jean Miller here to run a 6-12 Training Course in Australia, Rebecca Dalham commenced her novitiate as a 6-12 Trainer, and is now an Auxiliary AMI Trainer.

Several Australian Montessorians including Sue Birdsell, Sally Connellan, and Julia Hilson attended the inaugural Educateurs sans Frontières (EsF or Educators without Borders) gathering in Citta de Castello near Perugia in Italy in 1999. One of the outcomes arising from that lively gathering was confirmation of interest from the late Sylvia Carbome Singh from Mexico City to run a 0-3 Training Course in Australia. It was developed as an EsF initiative and with quite a lot of work from Julia Hilson and support from Renilde Montessori and the national body, the Montessori Australia Foundation (MAF). The course commenced and was run on the Gold Coast with almost 20 students in 1999 and 2000. Subsequent 0-3 courses have been run by Judi Orion in Sydney, the most recent with 9 Indigenous students, most of whom were engaged in the Strait Start parent and infant programs in the Torres Strait. Importantly, also, Judi agreed to mentor Sara Brady and Julia Hilson as Assistants to Infancy Trainers-in-Training and they are now well advanced on their training journey.

In the 17 years since Patricia Hilson's death, the Australian AMI community has progressed to the point where it has two 0-3 Trainers in Training, two 3-6 Directors of Training, and one 6-12 Auxiliary Trainer. This augurs well for training, quality assurance and mentoring into the future; not only in Sydney, Melbourne and Queensland, but also in Thailand, China and other regional centres.

For this achievement alone, huge credit is due to the professionalism and support of the Montessori Australia Foundation and most particularly AMTEF, for the manner in which this vital foundation has been built.

As each year rolled along, however, not only was there a growth in schools and classes, and the subsequent demand for training, but also a call for additional services and professional development. Initially there were small state based associations run by volunteers, however, the major step was to shift to add paid staff to do what people had done voluntarily for so long. The pressure of scale, accountability and liability was so great, however, that the need became pressing. There are many benefits from employing permanent staff in terms of contract, continuity and accountability. There are benefits also in having dedicated premises as a site for storage of documents, equipment and materials, a place to hold meetings and transact business. The genesis of our current suite of organisations came from the formation of Australian AMI Alumni Association (AAAA) around 1997/98. I recall that we had an extremely successful conference in Sydney in 1998, attended by Renilde Montessori, and I know that Megan Tyne, Dirk and Matty van Drempt, John and Andrea O’Halloran, Pam and John Staton and many others were heavily involved in ensuring that success.

During and since that time, the extent and magnitude of Megan’s contribution and influence have grown significantly. Megan has brought enormous energy, enthusiasm and productivity to her role as Executive Director of the Montessori Australia Foundation (MAF), the Montessori Children’s Foundation (MCF) and the Australian Centre for Montessori Studies (ACMS, formerly AMTEF), and she continues to achieve great things over a broad spectrum. She brings great vision, along with an international perspective. She was instrumental in securing the 2005 AMI Congress for Australia, considered one of the all-time great AMI Congresses! It represented a new threshold for Montessori in Australia and we have gone forward from there in confidence and scope with a series of growth and status-defining achievements.

We have challenges ahead including the recognition of Montessori and Montessori training, sourcing funds to support our work, publicity and communication of our message, striving for quality implementation of Montessori programmes and supporting research and validation of our success.

We must play to our strengths. No one has anything like our strength in early childhood education. We have the theory, the insights, the training, the materials, the repertoire, and they are all proven. With all this history behind us, we are not starting from scratch, but we are trying to take our Montessori presence to new levels of quality and influence. It will take every bit as much inspiration, grit and hard work as it took the pioneers that achieved so much in our first 100 years. I hope all of you will feel inspired to engage in the challenge to create a new golden age for Montessori in Australia.
What a grand century it has been since Montessori first took hold here in Australia.

We need not look very hard to see just how much life around us has changed in the last 100 years. From phones to autos to how we communicate across distances. We might almost wonder if the world is the same at all.

Then we look at the young child we see the same enthusiasm to learn and grow. We see the powers that drive the child to interact with the environment and come to know it intimately.

We look to education as a key to supporting this enthusiasm and passion to learn. We look to education as the key to supporting the universal drives that propel the child to construct himself.

Dr Maria Montessori began her work in the 19th century, but it was at the beginning of the 20th century that she watched the world of educators take hold of her seminal ideas and begin to apply them to the child. The universal child, the universal approach to the child's education made it possible for Montessori's ideas to spread like wildfire from one end of the world to the other.

In 1912, men and women from the far corners of the world gathered in Italy to take Dr Montessori's first official training course. Those of us who have taken our training in the last 40+ years have little idea of the great sacrifice these men and women made. We hear students today complaining that there is no training right near in their own backyards. Think for a moment how long a journey it was for those first few women to travel by ship from Australia to Europe and back again. While it was a great adventure it was also a great, long journey.

Our question to ponder today – is Montessori's approach to education still relevant in a world that has changed greatly in these past 100 years? Have the challenges of education changed so much as to leave Dr Montessori's ideas in the dust?

The short answer, of course, is NO! But let's look at the proof. We can philosophise about the child of today being no different than the child of the past or the child of the future and that is true. But what is it about Dr Montessori's approach to educating the young child that makes it an enduring approach to meeting the basic developmental needs of the child? What made the Montessori approach work in 1913 and why does it still work today?

We can look to the approach Dr Montessori designed to meet the child. It begins with the gathering of knowledge about what makes the child tick. Dr Montessori learned who the child was by observing and allowing the child to reveal himself to her. She knew instinctively that the only way to see “inside” the child was to watch what happens on the surface. Watch what objects or activities the child was naturally drawn to. Watch what interested the child at different points in his development. Watch what delighted the child and what frustrated the child.

This gathering of knowledge through observation of the individual child is still the key to knowing the child. It is an essential aspect of the training of the teacher and an essential key to successfully meeting the child’s needs in the classroom.

To observe is to see “what is” without prejudice or expectation! To see the child as it is with “clean eyes and a clear mind.” The knowledge we gather is factual.

In Dr Montessori’s day, the next step in her own education was to take the factual knowledge she had garnered through observation over time and across cultures and ponder the meaning. For it is worthless to gather knowledge just for the sake of knowledge. Dr Montessori believed that once the adult knew something about the child and his needs, it was important to understand the patterns that were being revealed.
Children today do live in a different world, but the needs of the child are still the same.

We are so fortunate in our day to have the writings of Dr Montessori as a starting point. We must still observe the child but we also have a history of understanding to draw upon when making our own decisions about what the child is revealing to us. We have outlines of the sensitive periods (which have not changed in thousands of years of human development) and her keys to understanding how the powers of the absorbent mind are typically manifested in the life of the child. This intuitive interpretation of the factual knowledge is still the key to meeting the child’s needs. We get hints as to the next appropriate presentation or how to help the child let go of a deviation that is getting in the way of exploring the world and learning from it.

When we make our observations of the child, whether the observation is formal or informal, we need to take time to think about what the appropriate response might be. We know that there are different social challenges in 2013. Children today do live in a different world, but the needs of the child are still the same. Surprisingly, purposeful work is still the key to helping the child meet his own needs. This brings us to the genius of the prepared environment.

Dr Montessori mystified her colleagues in the world of psychology and education. Her fellow researchers were content to gather facts and assign meaning. They wrote grand theses and books about their discoveries. Sometimes, we were enticed by other information that was on that same page! Today, children will use Google or Bing. However, the notion of being able to answer your own questions through research have not changed? No! Children today manifest those self-same needs. The sensitive period for movement and order are still at work and drive the child to seek out activities wherein they can meet these developmental needs. The child still wants to know the names of every activity and every object that they use. The child still learns spontaneously and joyously from these activities and delight in one day becoming consciously aware that they have new skills to use in their everyday life.

Children in Dr Montessori’s day had a great desire to learn to read and write, to know numbers and how to use them. Has that passion changed? No!

The fonts we use in the sandpaper letters have changed but the idea of using sandpaper letters has not changed at all. The notion of using objects and pictures to assist the child in learning to read has not changed even as the objects and pictures have changed.

The sensitive period still allows the child to master a great deal of common (and not so common) vocabulary before the age of 6 years. Some of that vocabulary is different – I don’t think children were learning words for computer, cell phone, astronaut, or internet 100 years ago, but they were learning the vocabulary of their day.

In 2013, we still use written communication. Oh, those of us who are “old dogs” might miss the days of written notes and hand-written letters, but we delight in Skype and texting. I can see my grandson in pictures and videos every few days. Children of today will tap their communications on screens but they still need to know the sounds of the letters and how to make words to communicate clearly. I know, they will take shortcuts and tap out cryptic messages but they first have to know the word they are shortening.

When their friend/parent sends a message back, the child will need to be able to read the communication. So learning the keys to reading and writing remain the same despite the differences in how we use those tools. We used to look up information in encyclopedias or reference books. Sometimes, we were enticed by other information that was on that same page! Today, children will use Google or Bing. However, the notion of being able to answer your own questions through research have not changed, just the methodology.

Children 100 years ago learned how to count, to add and to use fractions.
Children of today are no different! They count, they add and they discover the nature of fractions so they can use this knowledge in their everyday life. The tools to introduce the child to the nature of quantities and what you can do with them are the same today as they were in 1913.

We use wooden tiles for the Stamp Game instead of the paper stamps. But beyond that, not much has changed in the nature of the Montessori math materials. Children still have a mathematical mind that pushes them to learn another means to quantifying and organising their world.

The drive of the human tendency for exactness and precision still moves the child to master the “math facts” so he can be independent in carrying out equations. I observed a young boy one day who was at the chalkboard right beside my chair. He was writing simple multiplication equations with single digit multipliers and whipping through writing the answer. Soon he became bored as this offered no challenge and wrote an equation with a two-digit multiplier and of course, he was stuck since we normally don’t show how to handle that in the Children’s House. So he stopped. I asked him, how he could do the earlier equations so easily. He answered, “Well, I just can.” I pursued my query. “Really, but how did you learn that?” He paused to think for just a moment, then looked at me and said, “of course, I know how to multiply, I’m 5 now.” And so he was!! How delightful that he has no conscious sense of how he got to this point. That is the genius of Dr Montessori’s approach. The child learns spontaneously and effortlessly when the adult can tap into the powers that motivate the child during this critical phase of learning.

In her day, Dr Montessori could not explain neurologically what was going on in the brain. But she knew without a doubt, how to support the natural development of the child. She knew and understood the patterns of development that the children revealed to her.

Over a period of 50+ years, Dr Montessori had the opportunity to observe children all over Europe, in the United States and in India. She recognised the same patterns being manifested no matter where the children lived, no matter the cultural world that surrounded the child, no matter how fast the world was changing around her. Dr Montessori knew and recognised the activities that best inspired interactions on the part of the child. She developed more and more materials to meet the needs that she recognised.

While Dr Montessori was held in India for six years, she had the luxury of time for contemplation and study of her observations of children. It was here that she summarised the essence of her understanding of the nature of the developing human in her writings about the Four Planes of Development (Education). It is as if the universe provided this opportunity for contemplation at the same time the world seemed determined to destroy itself through war.

Dr Montessori had long been an advocate for education as the key to bringing about peace in an unpeaceful world.

After WWll, Dr Montessori was even more convinced that supporting the spontaneous development of the children of the world was the only way to bring about peaceful societies.

Dr Montessori was a revolutionary in her day. Today, we stand in her place. We meet on a daily basis, the children of the 21st century. We have the advances of technology to help us understand the powers at work in the physiology of the child. We can use this technology to enhance our understanding of the nature of the child who grows and learns. Yet, if we boil all this knowledge down to its essence, we discover that the needs of the child are still the same. We recognise that the beautiful prepared environment that we learned to know and love in our training is still the best means to supporting the child for it is only the child who can construct himself.

We can support, we can inspire and we can protect, but we cannot do the learning and growing for the child. Children still need loving, caring adults who are dedicated to them – loving and caring adults who observe them; then provide the right means at the right moment to meet the needs that are observed. This is our mission – to carry on the work that Dr Montessori began over 100 years ago. It is your mission to carry on the work here in Australia. Work begun 100 years ago by a small group of courageous women who travelled far to learn about an educational approach that seemed to set the world of education on its ear. We honour this heritage by the work we do today in 2013.
Many of us are familiar with the term Montessori as it applies to education but only few are familiar with the application of Montessori for Dementia. For a few aged care facilities across the country the movement to change the world of people living with dementia by using a Montessori approach continues to gain momentum.

Dr Maria Montessori was the first female physician in Italy. She specialised in paediatrics and rehabilitation, and initially worked with children who were typically impoverished and labelled ‘unteachable’. She developed an educational system that was designed as an instrument for social change and improvement.

Dr Maria Montessori’s philosophy and mission was:

• to enable individuals to be as independent as possible,
• to have a meaningful place in their community,
• to possess high self-esteem, and
• to have the chance to make meaningful contributions to their community.

Nearly 80 years later, Dr Cameron Camp, a Psychology Professor, examined the Montessori Philosophy and Principles and discovered important connections to dementia care. This led to his research on Montessori approaches for dementia. Montessori Methods for Dementia™ provide the framework for realising the vision of independence, high self-esteem and a promising future for people living with dementia.

The focus of such an approach is on ‘doing’ with activities and roles being developed based on individual strengths, interests, needs and abilities. This leads to activities that are meaningful to the person and a subsequent enrichment of their lives.

Montessori Methods for Dementia focus on supporting both the person and the environment which is adapted to support memory loss and independence. We are unable to change the devastating effects of dementia but we can incorporate strategies and alter the environment while providing meaning and purpose to the day – so that the person not only engages in life, but has the opportunity to maintain, and even restore function.

The approach is flexible, innovative and grounded in research. Since memory is impaired, remembering information for any length of time is a challenge, so Montessori Methods for Dementia focuses on putting information into the environment (eg. on cue cards, labels or in memory books) and working with preserved abilities (eg. reading, which is spared in dementia).

The identification of strengths and linking these to interests has resulted in a range of new roles and activities. In an aged care home in rural Victoria, where Anne has been working to implement a Montessori approach to care, a resident no longer spends his day wandering the unit in a state of despair and boredom. He now happily rubs back the handles of a bike he is restoring with the support of a young local lad.

A flower area provides the means and the interest for a lady to arrange vases of flowers everyday that adorn the dining tables. Another resident
sits at the table placing pegs around a bowl, a fine motor skill activity which enables her to practise and maintain the skills she requires to keep feeding herself. She was at risk of losing those skills but thanks to a Rehabilitative approach to care this is no longer the case.

This same activity enables a gentleman to learn to feed himself again. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkJc2Rk6lgA)

A resident who spent her life working as a nurse had fallen into the routine of staying in bed most of the day. She became very agitated and angry when staff attempted to get her out of bed. She can still roll bandages as well as she could all those years ago as a young nurse. From bandages she has progressed to folding face washers and serviettes and with the repetition she is now able to fill sugar bowls. She now has several activities and roles that fill her day and she no longer returns to bed at every opportunity.

Before this approach was taken, all residents from the dementia units were in bed by early evening. Now the units are abuzz with reading groups, Beyond Bingo games or singing. The norm now is for residents to start retiring to bed after supper at around 9.30–10pm.

Orientation cues adorn the walls along with interactive wall spaces. Signs invite residents to self initiate activities such as folding face washers, serviettes, going for a walk in the garden or even pouring a drink for themselves.

Once upon a time there were eight residents on Risperidone (an anti-psychotic drug), now there are none. Once upon a time there were residents receiving nutritional supplements, now these are not needed. Residents now choose the food they wish to eat from a Bain Marie and they can return for seconds or thirds if they wish. All food is labelled so they know what they are choosing. Red plates which provide good contrast to the food are used to enable residents to eat independently.

Diversional Therapists are now Rehabilitative Therapists where the emphasis is on activities that will maintain function as well as individual activities that embrace a sense of community, purpose and bring joy and meaning. The ability to feed or dress oneself, the ability to find the toilet or one’s own room become the basis upon which activities are developed.

The majority of residents now have a role to fulfil in the unit and this has resulted in a sense of community and belonging. In an industry where funding is determined based on deficits, the journey to change care practises has been difficult.

Implementing a Montessori or rehabilitative approach to care has required a shift from a deficit focus to a strength focus. Staff and management have had to challenge long held beliefs and attitudes. This gets easier as residents flourish and the positive outcomes are witnessed by all.

No longer is it called a Secure Unit, or Dementia Care Unit or Special Unit, but rather a Memory Support Unit – a unit where the environment is set up to support a person’s memory loss and where through a Montessori approach, staff encourage residents to function to the highest level possible given their dementia. There is an understanding and acceptance that while a person’s level of dementia cannot be changed, nor the disease process halted, each person has the right to be assisted and encouraged to function to their highest possible level.

Montessori Methods for Dementia can be adopted and applied anywhere where people living with dementia live or are cared for; their own home, residential care facilities, day respite programs and acute care facilities.
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 Montessori Children’s Foundation (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.

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.

For the first time, we now have quantitative evidence to show the success of Montessori programmes in the region. The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is a measure of how young children are developing in Australian communities. Like a census, it involves collecting information to help create a snapshot of early childhood development in communities across Australia. The Index maps children’s development across five domains:

- Physical health and well-being
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive skills
- Communication skills and general knowledge

The table shows significant improvement since implementation of Montessori.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AEDI OUTCOMES TORRES STRAIT</th>
<th>Vulnerable in one or more domains</th>
<th>Vulnerable in two or more domains</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td>59.9%</td>
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In addition to this, parent interviews were conducted in the Montessori programme, with some of the feedback as follows:

Parent Interviews – Strait Start

- She’s so independent now, she wants to do things on her own.
- He asks every day to go to Strait Start.
- She knows her colours, she can hold a pencil properly, and she does a lot of writing and colouring.
- It’s really good for her. She likes the books, and she always wants to read at home. She is quiet and calm at Strait Start.
- I used to do everything for them – I didn’t want them to make a mess. But now I let them do things themselves – now I know that’s how they learn.
- I learn new things here, then try to do them at home and show them to my other children. I read at home with all children now; we borrow books from the library.
- It’s very different from other places – here they learn.

Parent Interviews – 3-6 & 6-9

- She’s been able to follow her preferences and focus on what she enjoys. I can really see the difference it’s made to her.
- He’s so much more willing to learn, and very confident – much more than other children were.
- She’s got all the language on what she learns at school – she’s talking to me about isosceles and equilateral triangles at age 6.
- He learns faster, and he wants to go to school much more than my older one.
- I like the way the children respect the materials, and the way they work at their own pace and level in maths and reading.
Montessori: Making a Difference in Aboriginal Communities

Kay Boulden, Government and Community Liaison for the Montessori Children’s Foundation was joined by Cherie Singleton and Catherine Reed at the Centenary Conference to show how Montessori has made a difference in remote Aboriginal communities across Australia.

MCF’s partnerships in remote Aboriginal communities have produced some extraordinary outcomes. We want to share with you some stories of the amazing impact Montessori has had in two of the Aboriginal communities in which we have worked, both very remote, but also very different from each other, and to explore what we have learned – so far – about what must be done to achieve and maintain success.

We set out to make a difference – but the question we are really exploring is how we can make a difference in ways that can be sustained. We have triumphs and we celebrate them. But there are challenges too – and the only way to sustain our work and increase our capacity to make a difference is to explore the meanings of those challenges deeply.

So there are three key issues for us:

First, how do we bring a critical lens to bear on ourselves and our work?

Second, what does the term “the prepared adult” mean if that adult is working in remote Aboriginal communities which are so vastly different from what most of us have grown up with and know.

And thirdly, if we are to be effective, we must ask the question “Where have we come from?” Not only about the people we work to support, but also about ourselves – our assumptions, our experiences, our prejudices – and bring an historical and an inquiring perspective to our practice.

A first step in gaining some insight into the challenges we face might be gained by deepening our understanding of the complex histories and internal dynamics of the communities we work with, in terms of the impact they have on both community residents, and on those who go to work with them.

As an example, at invasion:

- The usual population estimate is around 300,000
- An estimated 250 language groups at the time of colonisation
- Largely hunter-gatherer economies
- No single Aboriginal culture
- No single experience of first contact
- No single experience of colonisation

Since invasion:

- Dispersal
- Creation of missions, morphing into communities
Traditional owners and Historical owners – and conflict – and incomers need to understand this: Montessori has a long history in Indigenous communities. A long history of making a difference. A long history of success.

Not all the communities in which we work are remote in the geographical sense. But often the gulf between life in communities and what most of us are familiar with is great – so perhaps there is a sense of remoteness after all.

Projects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have operated in:

- Redfern in Sydney, NSW, run by Barbara Stephen
- Minimbah Aboriginal community school in Armidale NSW run by Peter Erskine
- Wadjia Wadjia High School in Woorabinda, Queensland, run by Joel and Jenny Rioux
- Pormpuraaw childcare centre in Cape York, Queensland, operated by Cherie and Kevin Singleton
- Aurukun childcare centre (school holiday program), Queensland, involving at various times Fiona Campbell, Karen Leo, Jill Vizec, Kate Jeffrey, Lucy Reynolds, and Alex Dillon
- Kiwirrkurra Remote Community School, WA, operated by Catherine Reed (with support from Alex Dillon) and Andrea Mahiepala
- Papulankutja Remote Community School, WA, operated by Catherine Reed

Some triumphs include:

- Successful long-standing programs in some communities
- Clear positive impact on children’s well-being
- Impact on parents and community
- Strong family/community support
- Strong bonds & long-term relationships
- Partnerships – government and community

Some challenges faced include:

- Legacies of history
- Differences between communities
- Remoteness and isolation
- Resourcing – human and material
- Training
- Politics
- Hope and endurance
- “Blow-in” fatigue
- Cynicism

One example of Montessori’s impact in an Aboriginal community was recounted by Cherie Singleton, who gave her personal account at the Centenary Conference of the changes in Pormpuraaw.

My name is Cherie Singleton and I am a very proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman. I am Gunganji-Yidinji Irikanji and Kaygus, from Gimuy. My husband is Kevin Singleton, a Yirraghandij man also from Gimuy. Gimuy is the language name for what is more commonly known as Cairns. Between the two of us we have traditional and cultural family connections that extend throughout Cape York and the Torres Strait.

I was asked to talk about my experiences and achievements, and the goals I had whilst I was working at a beautiful Aboriginal community north west of Cairns. It is situated between two other Aboriginal communities, Aurukun and Kowanyama, and is called Pormpuraaw. It was once known as the Edward River Mission; however the traditional name suits it better.

In 2009 my husband and I decided to embark on a journey that not only made us grow in strength and character, but really challenged and changed our thoughts about education especially in an Aboriginal Community. It began when we went to Pormpuraaw for a holiday to visit my father Kurt Noble, who at that time was the director of the Aboriginal Women’s Resource Centre, Pormpur Paanth, a non-government organisation and completely separate from the Pormpuraaw Shire Council.

We were asked to help in the childcare centre and the after school and vacation care programs as Kevin and I have 30 years of experience as educators between us. Our previous knowledge and industry experiences allowed us, within a few months, to successfully coordinate all the children’s programs in Pormpuraaw.

We were constantly asked for assistance by outside services once they had seen how well organised and well coordinated each and every children’s program was. But more importantly, the Traditional Owners of the Pormpuraaw area, the Thaayorre people, and the Historical Owners, the Mungkan people from further north round Aurukun, asked us for our help and valued what we did in the community.

It was during these first few months that my husband and I met two very lovely, very well-spoken, very driven, very determined, very well organised women. One was once a consultant to the government, and is now the Government and Community Liaison for the Montessori Children’s Foundation, and has implemented life changing programs in Aboriginal Communities; and the other an International Montessori Teacher and Trainer, and both ladies decided to take a flight from Cairns and landed in Pormpuraaw.

Their names are Kay Boulden and Cheryl Ferreira.

Kay and Cheryl had seen how we had transformed the childcare centre and the other children’s programs from unacceptable and below standard to a beautiful centre that all children and parents and family members in Pormpuraaw would attend. It was due to regular consultations with Kay and Cheryl and a lot of convincing that I decided to take on the Montessori O-3 Diploma course, which was being held in Sydney.

Throughout the course I questioned myself, and my sanity. Why was I doing this? But apparently this is a common feeling when you talk to other Montessori educators.

At the end of the course I discovered that I would be the first Aboriginal woman in Australia to become a Montessori O-3 teacher and the six/seventh Torres Strait Islander woman to have a Montessori Diploma. This was a very overwhelming and proud moment for me and my family back home.

During our time in Pormpuraaw we implemented the Montessori Program in the childcare centre, and worked extremely hard. We were very committed to working towards full licencing and registration of the first Montessori childcare centre in Cape York. We had seen the impact and the success of the Montessori program unfold right in front of our eyes and believed in it. Montessori supported natural development from birth and we understood that the first plane of development is so vitally important, such a very crucial foundation for the child’s later development.

The program provided stability for the children, encouraged the development of peaceful behaviours and built trust with other community services like the Pormpuraaw Clinic. The community nurses, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, could enter the childcare room and participate in the presentations and activities being delivered to the toddlers of Pormpuraaw.
Montessori education is designed to enable children to make choices about their lives, whatever obstacle might occur, or if circumstances suddenly change. This is ideally suited to an Aboriginal Community as life has a habit of changing in the blink of an eye – especially if community politics are involved.

The Department of Education and the principals and teachers were very supportive of the Montessori approach within the childcare centre as children who were entering prep were school ready for the first time. Parents and caregivers had full knowledge of the expectations of school life and felt a lot more comfortable when leaving their children at school. Parents and children were given knowledge and prepared for primary school life through the Montessori childcare centre and trust and acceptance were developed.

The Elders of Pormpuraaw supported us, like Nanna Celia Peters a Traditional Elder who watched me and my husband very carefully. As time went by she claimed us as her grandchildren. I would consistently give updates on the children progress and built strong respectful relationships with mothers, fathers, grandparents and caregivers.

The mutual respect even flowed into the child safety house where an agreement was formed between myself and the workers so that children of toddler age would attend the childcare centre every Monday to Friday and would even remind the carers to “hurry up and take us to Kevin and Cherie’s school”.

I demonstrated the presentations that I had been taught at the 0-3 Diploma Courses in Brisbane and in Sydney, to the children of Pormpuraaw, and reflected on what I saw. Within two weeks the children were doing the work with precision, care, patience and creativity. Our prepared environment in the childcare centre exhibited flow, organisation and balance; it included traditional language activities from the Thaayorre and Mungkan clans, hands on learning with materials age appropriate to the children’s ability and age, and a huge emphasis on the link between the development of the hands and brain function.

From 2009 to September 2012 the childcare centre went from strength to strength. We were still encountering weekly challenges; however, it was progressively becoming less and less. It was during the month of September 2012 that our world turned upside down and all the hard work that my husband and I did came to an end. We became victims of the kind of community politics based on jealousy and greed that affect many communities. This often involves the relationship between the elected councillors and the administrators of communities, and the way getting into positions of power through membership of the council means giving advantages to your family members and allies through access to jobs and housing.

And this is what happened to us. We were “outsiders” and we demanded a high standard from workers in the childcare centre. We disrupted old patterns of behaviour that were not in the interests of children that had gone on for years.

And then one day, out of the blue, we were issued with a “move on notice” eviction from our house.

One council member fought for us, and the Elders and Traditional Owners tried to arrange meetings with the CEO of the Council, but they were locked out of the Council chambers, the police were called, and they were escorted away, these elderly people trying to save something they valued for their children.

The disappointment, the hurt and the anger were overpowering for us.

In late November 2012 my family and I left Pormpuraaw and the childcare centre finally closed its doors, bringing Montessori in Pormpuraaw to an end. The centre remains closed to this day.

If Montessori is going to develop in an Aboriginal Community like Pormpuraaw there needs to be a holistic approach and legally binding contracts that no CEO can destroy. What we saw was a group of supposedly responsible adults playing God with the children’s lives in the community of Pormpuraaw.

Housing is a major issue. Accommodation that is not controlled by the council is fundamental to putting programs such as our Montessori childcare centre beyond the reach of community politics. Isn’t Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians a priority in this day in age? Because I can definitely say we were closing the gap and lifting standards in the Aboriginal Community of Pormpuraaw.

Catherine Reed from Western Australia’s Ngaanyatjarra Lands School shared her story of Montessori’s introduction to the Kiwirrkurra campus.

My name is Catherine Reed and this is the third year I have been working at the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School. The School, which was established in 2007, is a remote multi campus school. So hello, and welcome and in Ngaanyatjarra, yuwa, walgummnu.

In 2011 and 2012, I worked in Kiwirrkurra Remote Community, the most remote community in Australia, and the second most remote community in the world. I arrived in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands having completed a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education at the University of Notre Dame in Fremantle WA. Since then I have also gained experience in being a plumber, reptile handler, electrician, vet, gardener, cleaner,
Kiwiirrkura is a special place. It was here that the last known Aboriginal people in Australia still living a traditional hunter-gatherer life, now known as the Pintupi Nine, came to live in a community – less than 30 years ago, in 1984.

The School caters for 350 students ranging from kindergarten through to Year 12 students. The majority of the students are Aboriginal whose first language can be Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara. They do not come to school able to speak English.

When I arrived in Kiwiirrkura, straight from university, I tried to teach in the way I’d been taught; and I found it simply did not work.

The children in my class came to school unable to speak English. They were often malnourished and hungry. They suffered from health problems we rarely encounter in city schools; as well as recurrent infestations of headlice, children turned up at school covered in scabies, and with flesh eating skin infections.

I wanted to create an environment that met their basic needs for health and well-being, as well as providing opportunities to engage and flourish as learners. I went searching for a teaching and learning methodology that allowed this and Montessori Education is what I found.

With the help of Montessori Children's Foundation and the Montessori Australia Foundation, and with the constant support of my Montessori mentor, Alex Dillon, we began fostering a Montessori pilot for 3 year olds to 7 year olds. And amazing things happened.

Maria Montessori created the Children’s Houses to provide the same environment for disadvantaged children.

This year a Montessori trained teacher from Perth has taken over as directress in Kiwiirrkura and I have moved to Papulankutja Remote Community, 60km west of the WA, SA, NT tristate border, to begin another Montessori ECEC Classroom.

And once again, remarkable things are happening.

I have a huge passion for early childhood education and especially for Indigenous students – every child has the right to a high quality education regardless of their geographical location. Montessori teaching and learning practices have provided me with a way to create a learning environment that resonates with Aboriginal culture.

It is deeply rewarding work – but it is not without challenges. I can’t tell you how many students are in my class as it changes daily – somewhere between ten to thirty depending on events such as a death in the community.

I would like to share something of real life in a remote aboriginal community. We have had serious rain causing road closures to trucks and heavy duty vehicles; therefore, the food and fuel truck can not get through from Kalgoorlie or Alice Springs. We have not had fresh fruit or vegetables in weeks. We have not had a mail plane for 2 weeks as it can’t land on our dirt runway due to bad weather. We have had 2 deaths this week and sorry business is now beginning in Papulankutja. It will increase the population from 150 people to over 1000. The three teacher school will have to accommodate the visiting students.

We are a long way from family and friends. We have no mobile phone reception, no internet access, no newspapers or magazines; no doctor, police, fireman, ambulance, no chemist, no restaurants. Fuel is $2.80 per litre. Goannas live in our toilet and roof. 30 plus camels live in our front yard. I’ve been flown to Perth to see an Infectious Disease Specialist as I had a flesh eating skin inflection that was beginning to shut down my internal organs. I have been broken into and held up at knife point.

So why do I stay? For the same reason you do your job. Two words. THE KIDS.

From the community’s point of view, I am just another white fella coming into town. Imagine how many white fellas they have seen coming in, doing their ‘time’, then moving on. All of them have had a ‘great idea’ that is going to change Indigenous education.

However, the difference is Montessori Education. The best part is that we all have the same methodology with the same goals and outcomes regardless of what geographical location we reside in. The classroom environment is the same, the materials are the same, the teachers role and the students role is the same and I believe that is what remote education needs: consistent goals and expectations with a sustainable educational methodology.

It is with great excitement that this year in Australia we celebrate 100 years of Montessori Education; however this year I also celebrate its 1st birthday in Papulankutja and its 3rd birthday in Kiwiirrkura because without it I would just be another white fella coming in doing their ‘time’ and moving on.

But now, with the support of Montessori schools across Australia and adventurous, resilient and flexible directors and directresses taking part in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island initiatives, success in remote education is possible.
The United Kingdom has the highest rate of female imprisonment in the European Union and around three quarters of these female UK prisoners have been given custodial sentences for non-violent crimes, of these, two thirds have dependent children under the age of 18.

In other words, half of the women in prison for non-violent crimes are mothers and consequently more than 17,000 children are separated from their mothers by the prison system in any given year.

This enforced separation is exacerbated by the fact that one in seven women has difficulty ensuring that her children are looked after during her time in prison. Of the 4,144 women currently in prison in the UK 700 are held more than 100 miles from their homes. It is estimated that only half of the women who were in contact with their children before imprisonment will receive a visit from them during the period of sentencing.

The fate of a child whose mother is convicted and sentenced will vary according to the care arrangements that are made but the charity Barnados reports that "children who have a parent in prison are three times more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour" and that "statistics indicate that children of prisoners are more likely to be incarcerated in adulthood than other children."

But this is not all, approximately two babies per week are ‘born inside’, into a prison system that has a grand total of around 806 mother and baby places available.

There are 14 women’s prisons in England and none in Wales and of these only seven prisons have mother and baby units. Two of them can care for children up to 18 months old and the remaining 5 can only care for children up to 9 months.

Holloway Prison in North London is the largest women’s prison in the UK and it has a mother and baby unit with 13 places for babies up to the age of 9 months.

It is here that the Maria Montessori Institute has established a programme called ‘Born Inside – Holloway Prison’ inspired by the AMI ‘Éducateurs sans Frontières’ programme and working in collaboration with psychotherapist Pamela Stewart.

This work is made profoundly difficult due to the nature of imprisonment – as Pamela puts it, ‘Often these women are frightened to bond with their child, even while they are pregnant, because they know that the child is going to be taken away from them.’

This is the starting point for the collaboration between Beverley Maragh from the Maria Montessori Institute and Pamela Stewart. Their programme is designed to support pregnant and new mothers and babies using Montessori principles and drawing on the resources of the Aid to Life Project (www.aidtolife.org).

I had the opportunity to ask Beverley some questions about the work she is doing:

Beverley, how often do you visit the ‘mother and baby’ unit at Holloway Prison?
We meet once a week, year round and spend about half a day in the prison.

What are you hoping to achieve through these sessions?
We help the mothers gain insight into the developmental needs of their babies and to understand what they can do to support them. Our intention is to make them aware of the positive impact they can have on the lives of their babies even in an unnatural environment such as prison. We also try to gain their trust so that we can encourage them to think about their own lives, the experiences that brought them into their current situation and what they can do to avoid being separated from their children in the future.

Tell us something about the work that you are doing?

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Tell us something about the work that you are doing?

There are 12 cells on the ‘mother and baby’ unit. The mothers vary in age from 18 to 46 and come from a wide range of cultures. All of the babies are under 9 months, after that, they may be transferred to another prison unit which cares for children up to eighteen months, if there is space available. In some cases the babies may be given to
other members of their family. These separations are traumatising for the mothers and their babies.

In addition to working with mothers once they have given birth we also work with women who are pregnant leading up to the birth. In some cases the women will transfer to the mother and baby unit. In other cases they may have opted not to sit in front of the Admissions Board for access to the mother and baby unit or they may have been refused a place on the unit. In these cases separation takes place at birth and we continue to support these women, usually meeting with them and talking about ways in which they may be able to keep in contact with the child.

What is the most challenging aspect of this work?

There are many challenges for all of us. The women themselves have already experienced a number of challenges in their own lives and having a baby in prison presents yet more complications for them to have to deal with. The women have difficulty developing trust in each other and this is a crucial issue for us to deal with. Beyond this we help them to realise that, in spite of their surroundings, they can take responsibility for creating a positive nurturing environment, which will help the growth and development of their babies. Daily life, of necessity, is dictated by the rules and regulations of the prison and this can also have its challenges. For example, recently there was an outbreak of chicken pox on the unit and everyone in the unit was quarantined. This meant that all transfers out of the unit were delayed for 8 weeks causing a dispiriting lowering of morale.

What kind of work are you managing to do to help the babies?

Our work has centred around physical care, breastfeeding, weaning, sleeping and encouraging the development of communication and spoken language. We also show the mothers how to create play materials and how to create a ‘prepared environment’ conducive to promoting co-ordinated movement and levels of independence in the babies. These simple but profound improvements will significantly increase the life chances of these little children.

We encourage the mothers to let the babies lie freely on the rugs we have brought in and it takes time for them to feel comfortable enough to place the babies on the rugs so that they can move freely. The mothers are often amazed at what their children are capable of – watching their baby roll over for the first time or reach out for a toy – can serve as a source of pride in their child’s achievements.

We encourage them to allow their babies to explore and not to rush to every cry or sound with an offer of food. It has been a challenge to overcome the idea that a quiet baby equals a good baby. In the beginning babies were encouraged to sleep and many remained in their prams with a cover over the hood to keep them from being disturbed. Little by little the mothers also begin to reflect on the impact that their own personal experiences have had, not only on their current situation but also on their own expectations of motherhood.

It sounds like it is difficult to establish trusting relationships. What kind of progress are you able to make?

We have a group space and we encourage a great deal of discussion and reflection. For instance we encourage them to listen to the way they communicate with one another and to consider the impact their own words and tone might have on their babies. When we ask them how they resolve misunderstanding and conflict in their own families we usually discover a wide range of responses. Certainly, we create a safe space for each mother to express her thoughts and experiences in the knowledge that we will respect their privacy and will operate confidentially unless given permission otherwise. Our non-judgemental approach and genuine interest in their relationship with their baby is always helpful. We have also talked about the importance of breast-feeding in the early days both nutritionally and as a way of bonding and providing the beginnings of a healthy relationship. Many of the mothers have begun breast-feeding and some have continued.

Others, depending upon circumstances, may stop or change to breast and bottle at around 8 weeks. When the children are around 5 months of age we begin to talk about weaning and the introduction of solids.

I understand you are modelling the programme of the Aid to Life initiative. What aspects and resources have you found helpful?

We have worked with the women on the nature of the communication they have with their babies. We encourage them to hold the babies face to face and talk directly to them. The importance of reading to their babies and singing and rhyming is both modelled and discussed. Together we have watched the Aid to Life DVD on Communication and
since then we have noticed the women giving more attention to the sounds their babies make and singing and talking to their babies much more calmly. The surrounding environment on the unit is often very noisy with different radio and television stations playing in the cells. This has given us an opportunity to talk about the impact over-exposure to noise and technology may have on their baby’s development.

Not only do we concentrate on the importance of movement for the child’s development by providing a large sheet, some tiny soft toys, very small rattles, soft balls and rings which are placed on the mat a few at a time but we also talk about the importance of clothing and explain how certain types of clothing can be restricting for the children. For example it took some time to persuade the mothers not to put socks on the babies feet when they were on the movement sheet. They were concerned that they would be acting irresponsibly if the babies’ feet were to get cold.

We also provide a range of mobiles for the children to look at that are interesting and developmentally appropriate. Seeing the toys on the floor for the first time, two of the babies attempted to roll. It took a while for the mums to realise that this was a really positive action from the babies and not an act of disobedience. While the babies were on the floor the mothers also came and sat on the floor and little by little they were so interested in what the babies were doing that they began to focus on the babies and not themselves. It took a short time before they were interacting with the babies and showing them the toys. We showed the mothers how to place things a little beyond the reach of the babies from time to time and they were amazed to see the positive effort their baby would display in trying to move towards the toy.

In the beginning, one baby just lay there the whole time till she fell asleep. Another began to cry but we encouraged the mother to speak reassuringly to her baby and she was surprised and pleased that her baby stopped crying.

The following week we brought in another softer blanket for the floor for the younger babies who were then also placed on the floor. At first one of them began to cry but once reassured lay on the floor on his tummy. Then he began to lift his head up and look round. Then another mother placed her 6-week-old baby on the mat and sat and talked to him when he looked up at her. The baby who had only fallen asleep the week before was making some attempt to roll over and the trefult baby who had not been too sure of being left on the mat was rolling from her back to her tummy and back again.

Until our visits, opportunities for movement had been very limited, as the babies had either been held by their mothers, pushed around in buggies or kept in ‘bouncers’. It makes us think that in these ways the babies are kept in a non-moving prison of their own. The mothers were learning how easy it is to create a space for babies and how to encourage them to be in motion by using simple inexpensive everyday objects. The good news is that the mothers have now said they have been using the movement sheets whilst we’re not there.

I understand that you are trying to also apply the Montessori principle of ‘help me to help myself’ in your approach with the mothers.

Yes. We have asked the women to think how they could arrange the room in such a way that supports the interests and needs of the babies. A mirror on the floor is an endless source of interest. They are also encouraged to think of simple, inexpensive toys that will encourage movement and language development. One of our major goals is to encourage the mothers to think for themselves in making best use of their environment and their time with their babies. It is counter-productive to try and impose our own ideas on them but through communication and respect and a consistent reliable presence we are beginning to see the women respond and even prepare the room in advance for the session. They are also keen to share what their babies have achieved in the intervening week and show much more confidence in their children. We hope that this will stand them in very good stead upon release where they will no longer have the support and security of the prison staff 24 hours a day or our visits.

The one main thing that has been established within the group is a level of trust. When we say we will try to find out some information for them we always follow through.

Presumably there are other support mechanisms for this mothers and babies too?

Yes, part of our role is to empower the women to contact other agencies to resolve their own issues. In prison they become dependent and institutionalised very quickly. We have worked with them on the idea that they will need to be proactive when they are released to find support in the community. We work closely with Hibiscus agency — a programme for foreign national women, which gives them help with immigration issues as many of the foreign nationals will face deportation upon their release. Also, Care Confidential helps with dealing with loss of children to adoption and fostering. St Mungos helps the homeless.

Birth Companions offer anti natal classes and will sometimes attend the birth as a ‘birth supporter’. Women in Prison offers education, training and practical support for women who have been or are in prison.

They also receive individual psychotherapy and other educational opportunities in Holloway prison to encourage them to use their time productively while they are in prison. These courses range from vocational courses, such as beauty and hairdressing to Open University courses or English language courses for those with little or no English.

There are many challenges for all of us. The women themselves have already experienced a number of challenges in their own lives and having a baby in prison presents yet more complications for them to have to deal with.
It seems like this is very challenging work. Are you making progress?

The prison is a very complex organisation and it takes a lot of time and patience but we are seeing positive signs. The potential benefits are immense, not only will the babies get a better start in life but the mothers will have a higher level of competence when released and we believe that over time there will be a reduction in reoffending.

We feel we are making real progress. Over the past year we have developed good relationships with the prison staff and the women. We continue to encourage the mothers to think about their babies and to think about what is going on in the baby’s mind. They are beginning to see their babies as individuals with unique personalities with needs of their own.

This work is only possible once the women trust us and we have to work hard to gain their respect. By modelling respect for the mothers and a willingness to listen to them and by paying attention to the babies it seems that the mothers pick up on this and are now more able to do the above for their babies.

WORKING TOGETHER

It has been interesting to observe how the mothers have become much more relaxed about their babies and now when we arrive they want to tell us what they have been doing with them or what the babies can now do. It wasn’t like this in the beginning.

The mothers have even started to go swimming with the babies on Sunday mornings. The mothers whose children have begun to wean have helped each other in experimenting with a greater variety of foods, they have tried different tastes for the babies and are much more interested in nutritional issues.

In those instances where we had the opportunity to spend time with the women before the birth we noticed an especially high level of trust emerged and those mothers were particularly open to our suggestions.

Slowly but surely we have seen a change in attitude from the mothers, they have come to understand that the babies need them to interact in order to help their development. It is a subtle change and it helps the mums value themselves, this in turn changes their responses to the children and a virtuous circle is begun.

In the beginning a child that was striving to be active or to do something was seen as ‘naughty’ or causing difficulty – sleeping and inactivity were the preferred state for the babies – now they realise they need to be active and engaged.

It was interesting for us to witness how a mother who was feeling low would unknowingly elicit a response in her baby of inactivity and sleep whereas activity and engagement with the babies created greater harmony amongst the mums.

We have seen how the mothers have conquered their anxieties and have developed a trust in their babies and now speak positively about supporting and caring for them.

I think the constancy of our presence, our patience and honesty has created a secure and safe psychological environment. The mums have then witnessed for themselves that what we said could happen did happen and so over time we gained their trust and this has led to many conversations about the positive changes and hopes they have for their lives when they are released.

Some have begun to talk about how they regret their crimes and do not want to come back to prison again. They also recognise what they stand to lose if they find themselves back in prison as next time they will not have the opportunity to be with their children.

I was really touched recently while waiting for a bus in Oxford Street. A woman approached me pushing a pram and I realised it was one of our mums who had been released. She wanted me to know that she was doing well, and of course how well the baby was progressing and how grateful she was for what we had shown her.

She also told me that she never again wanted to find herself on the inside of a prison.