

WHITE AUSTRALIA HAS A BLACK HISTORY: UNDERSTANDING WHERE ABORIGINAL KIDS COME FROM

By Charles Davison

**Australian AMI Alumni Association Conference
Honouring the Human Potential: The Past, Present and Future of Montessori Education
August 1998**

CHARLES DAVISON is President of the NSW Chapter of the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and is Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer with the Department of School Education. He has collaborated in the re-writing of the Department's Aboriginal Education Policy and with the development of staff inservice materials. Charles had a leading role in establishing the Manning Valley 'Australians for Reconciliation' group. He has represented the community on committees, in forums and as a speaker on health, youth, juvenile justice, education and social justice issues at local, regional and State levels. Charles is married with four children and is committed to achieving reconciliation through educating the whole community about Aboriginal Australia.

I'm very pleased to be invited to speak at this conference. First of all, in the important tradition revived by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, I acknowledge the Eora people who belonged to and cared for this land for thousands of years and then were among the first to suffer the often fatal impact of the British invasion.

I speak as President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated. The AECG is a community-based, incorporated organisation of volunteers in local and regional AECG's across the state. The AECG is recognised as principal adviser to the NSW Minister for Education and Training on Aboriginal education and training in NSW. Over 21 years we have developed partnership with government schools and TAFE (now the Department of Education and Training) and all sectors of education and training. We also advise educational publishers, students at all levels and the general public about Aboriginal education.

Obviously our main priority is the appropriate education of Aboriginal people. In that sense Aboriginal education and the AECG are about changing the system to get a fair go for Aboriginal people. But Aboriginal education must be, also and essentially, educating all students, and all Australians, about Aboriginal Australia — our history and our cultures; our way of seeing; our issues now and where they come from. In this sense Aboriginal education is telling the truth about this country. This is why, when the AECG rewrote the Aboriginal Education Policy with the Education Department, we made sure that the policy is for all students, all staff, all schools.

The AECG is totally committed to reconciliation based on justice. We say you can't have reconciliation without justice. We see education as absolutely fundamental to reconciliation. This is why it is our policy that Aboriginal Studies must be mandatory for all students in Years 7-10. As I speak we are negotiating mandatory Aboriginal perspectives in K-6 HSIE, which we regard as critical because this is where children learn about their society and the world.

Reconciliation has a lot to do with history and history with reconciliation. It is about acknowledgement of what has happened. It is not about guilt, but it has to be about shame. If Australians can be proud of Phar Lap and Don Bradman, then Australians can be ashamed of Myall Creek and the calculated inhumanity of so many government policies this century, especially taking the children away and breaking up Aboriginal families. Because, as the "Bringing Them Home" video says, "We are family people."

History is incredibly important. You need to understand that, in the words of the 1988 NAIDOC slogan and posters ever since, “White Australia Has A Black History”. History in this country is not something abstract that happened somewhere else. In this country history is what has happened to Aboriginal people.

My Story

If I tell you my story, it may help give you some idea where a lot of Aboriginal people are coming from. My father was born in Uralla, Anaiwan country; my mother was born in Manilla and grew up in Guyra in Gamilaroi country. I was born at the old Crown Street Women’s Hospital and spent my childhood at La Perouse in Eora country; then went to school at Liverpool in Gandangara country. I mention these countries because it is important for other Australians to realise that there is another map of Australia. Another word you need to learn is Koori, the name us blackfellas in most of NSW use to refer to ourselves.

I left Lurnea High School in 1970 in Year 8. Like most Aboriginal people of my generation, and still too many Aboriginal students now, I was an early school leaver. One of the key issues of reconciliation is understanding the level of Aboriginal disadvantage. And one of the main areas of this disadvantage has been education. Everyone knows how important education is to life chances. But think about these facts in terms of life chances: in 1970 there were just 3 Aboriginal HSC students in this state; until 1972 school principals had the power to exclude any Aboriginal student; in 1980 the Aboriginal retention rate — that means the number of Koori kids who started Year 7 and finished Year 12 — was 6.4 out of every hundred. Aboriginal retention (and life chances) have improved in the years since, but are still much less than half the national average.

After this abbreviated schooling I worked for some years in a range of jobs in Sydney and the north coast, then settled in Taree in 1975 and worked for ten years with Manning Base Hospital: two years as gardener’s assistant, three years as storeman, then five years as boiler attendant. On the way I got my first qualification, a Boiler Attendant’s Certificate. The job was 24-hour shift work, and in the long slow times I faced the prospect of spending the rest of my life watching gauges. So I decided to use that time and gained entry as a mature age student in the Associate Diploma of Aboriginal Studies at the University of South Australia, studying by correspondence. About two years into this course, I gained the opportunity — and the confidence — to leave the hospital and work for my community, with Aboriginal youth. And looking back I suppose what gave me that confidence was being able to succeed at university level in that course.

So in 1988 I started as Adolescent and Parent Support Worker with the Biripi Aboriginal Medical Service (Biripi is the name of the people and country of Taree) working with Aboriginal youth in Taree who were considered ‘at risk’ and ‘in need of care,’ especially the streetkids. And I bet you didn’t know there were street kids in Taree. I enrolled in the Associate Diploma of Social Welfare at the University of Western Sydney Macarthur campus. Now we hear a fair bit these days about special programs for Aboriginal people. But what enabled me to finally complete my diploma in 1993 was the Aboriginal Rural Education Program. AREP was a block release program which brought me to Sydney for two-week blocks of intensive face-to-face lectures then back to my community to work on assignments. With my family commitments (four kids to feed), my work in Taree, and the responsibilities I had in the community, there was no other way I could have gained that qualification. But for that special program, I would not be talking to you today.

In my work with Aboriginal youth, I realised that the key to real solutions to these issues is education. So I got involved in education and joined the AECG, and later was employed by the Department of School Education as Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer. Then in February this year I was elected president of the AECG. And here I am.

A Personal View

Let me tell you something of my experience as an Aboriginal person living for over twenty years in a NSW country town, experiencing and witnessing racism at the grass-roots level. I spent a lot of time as advocate for young people in Taree, and was involved in many discussions, meetings and forums to resolve issues or argue the effects of racism in the community. I have seen Aboriginal children and adults stand at shop counters and not get served. Friends and relatives of mine have rung the real estate to apply for housing in town, only to arrive and find that the home they had inquired about was said to be already taken, or not available for some unbelievable reason. There have been countless incidents of racism in schools, on the sporting fields, in the pubs and clubs, down the main street of town, in the print, radio and television media and in the community in general. The unfortunate thing is that many people choose to ignore racism or are so used to what is the normal way that they just don't recognise it as racism.

Non-Aboriginal friends have told me what they hear from people, some professional, some in positions that are supposed to provide support for people from low socio-economic backgrounds, which by definition tends to include most Aboriginal people. I've heard of comments like, "If you ignore them long enough, they'll leave the shop," from shop owners or their staff. I know about unwritten policies not to employ Aboriginal people "because they are bad for business" — reinforcing the institutional racism that still exists today, particularly in so many country towns like Taree. Over the 22 years I lived in Taree, I could count on one hand the number of Aboriginal people who have served behind the counter of any business in Taree. As I once said on Radio National, "Racism is alive and well in Taree." As it is in many country towns — and in the cities.

One other example. I'll never forget the farewell when I left Manning Base Hospital: all the usual positive comments, best wishes for the new job, etc. But what sticks in my mind is what a co-worker said to a friend of mine — the sort of remark that is not at all unusual in country towns: "There goes another black activist!" Obviously that remark hurt, but I guess little did that person know how true his words were. Because that is what I was and what I am and it's why I'm here today. People might also care to think about why there are so many so-called black activists — because jumping up and down so often seems to be the only way to change things. Some of the things I challenged over the years were the 98% Aboriginal unemployment rate in Taree, Aboriginal kids being barred from supermarkets because, "We've had trouble with your lot"; developing Aboriginal Studies resources for all students; challenging racism in education, and working on strategies to stop child abuse.

Changing Systems

Why we are about changing the system in Aboriginal education is because the system never included us in the past. And the same has applied to all other systems in this country over the last 200 odd years. Australian systems have been based on White Australia. Education is so important for reconciliation simply because so many other Australians know so little about Aboriginal Australia. This is not their fault. So many other Australians have grown up in White Australia and learnt little or nothing (or lies) about Aboriginal Australia in their education. So many other Australians have never met Aboriginal people. So many still have little or no contact with Aboriginal people in their daily lives. Until recently generations of Australians could live their lives in the cities and never meet Aboriginal people. This is why the regional forums across NSW leading up to last year's Reconciliation Convention all stressed that the biggest barrier to reconciliation was ignorance and the greatest need was education. It is important to think about that — the biggest barrier is ignorance of Aboriginal Australia, and the greatest need is education about Aboriginal Australia.

Reconciliation means learning our shared history — understanding that White Australia has a black history. This is not only the atrocities and the calculated inhumanity of government policies of

the past. There is a positive side to Aboriginal people being part of Australian history. First, there is the oldest living culture on earth. There is also Aboriginal guides opening up this country; Aboriginal people who built the outback cattle industry; the black diggers; Aboriginal artists and writers; Aboriginal sports stars, now and in the past.

Thinking about the Aboriginal history of this country, a good place to start is the dates of Reconciliation Week, 27 May to 3 June. 27 May is the 1967 Referendum; 3 June is the day the High Court put an end to terra nullius, 'land belonging to no one', that White Australia was based on.

The 1967 Referendum was when Aboriginal people were for the first time to be counted as citizens in our own country. People need to be aware that we had been excluded from White Australia: written out of the constitution, no vote, excluded from the pension, barred from the public service, not to be recruited in the armed services from 1909 to 1951; living 'under the Act', which meant not having the rights that Australian citizens took for granted.

What I want you to think about is that even after the referendum to count us in the census, we still didn't even exist in this country because Australia was still White Australia. The White Australia Policy was not formally abolished until December, 1972. This was a migration policy, to keep coloured people out of White Australia. But at the same time it defined Australia as White and denied the existence of the coloured people in Australia; that is us, Aboriginal people.

To illustrate what White Australia was about, I want to read you what the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines told the first Native Welfare Conference in Canberra in 1937. This was the meeting that came up with the assimilation policy to make us Aboriginal people the same as White Australians. Think about the mindset this statement represents, the mindset of assimilation and White Australia — and how much Australia has changed. What Mr. Neville told the conference was:

"We have power under the act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life...are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were ever any Aborigines in Australia?"

The point is that White Australia was racist by definition. You can't even say "White Australia" without talking about racism in the same breath. Now that may sound a bit tough but it's the truth. And as the Premier rightly said in Parliament this year, recognition of the true facts, the hard realities, is essential to reconciliation.

Now think about the implications of the fact that White Australia was abolished less than 26 years ago. That might seem a long time ago. But think about it this way. Most people in positions of power or influence or authority are more than 26 years of age. So that means that people in power in Australia have grown up to a greater or lesser extent in White Australia and with those attitudes and values and that frame of reference which simply excluded the people of this land by definition. It's the frame of reference that is racist and must change if Aboriginal people are to not just get a fair go but be part of this country as we have a right to be. Education is the key to this. As Linda Burney has said,

"If reconciliation is to be achieved — if any worthwhile indicator of progress is to be visible by the so-called cut-off date of 2001 — what all education has to be about is changing the frame of reference of mainstream Australia so that Aboriginal issues are no longer out there on the margins somewhere, but part of the main agenda, integral to all the main debates in Australia."

History and education about history are fundamental to reconciliation. I want to read two quotes to illustrate this. First, a quote from the speech by Paul Keating in 1992 to launch the United Nations International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples. That was a really important speech for Aboriginal people — the first time a Prime Minister of Australia admitted in public what had really happened in this country. Acknowledgement means being able to put yourself in the other person's shoes. As I read you extracts from that speech, I want you to think about what you know of our shared history, while I repeat the Prime Minister's words, and put yourselves in the shoes of the "I" and the "we." What the Prime Minister said was:

"...and as I say, the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians.

It begins, I think, with that act of recognition.

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing.

We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life.

We brought the diseases. The alcohol.

We committed the murders.

We took the children from their mothers.

We practised discrimination and exclusion.

It was our ignorance and our prejudice, and our failure to imagine these things being done to us.

With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds.

We failed to ask — how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us...."

That is perhaps a little confronting, though of course it is true. The Prime Minister then went on to invite other Australians to imagine how they would feel if what happened to Aboriginal people happened to them:

"As I said, it might help if we non-Aboriginal Australians imagined ourselves dispossessed of the land we had lived on for fifty thousand years —and then imagined ourselves being told that it had never been ours.

Imagine if ours was the oldest culture in the world and we were told it was worthless.

Imagine if we had resisted this settlement, suffered and died in the defence of our land, and then were told in history books that we had given up without a fight.

Imagine if non-Aboriginal Australians had served their country in peace and war and were then ignored in history books.

Imagine if our feats on the sporting fields had inspired admiration and patriotism and yet did nothing to diminish prejudice.

Imagine if our spiritual life and denied and ridiculed.

Imagine if we had suffered the injustice and then were blamed for it."

Mr. Keating also said,

"The report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody shows, with devastating clarity, that the past lives on in inequality, racism and injustice."

Now I want to read from the report of the Royal Commission, which stressed self-determination as the solution to the issues and history as the root of the problems. The Royal Commissioner wrote:

"I include in this report a chapter of that history. I do so not because the chapter adds to what is known but because what is known is known to historians and Aboriginal people and it is a principal thesis of this report that it must become more known ... the first is the deliberate and systematic disempowerment of Aboriginal people starting with dispossession from their land and proceeding

to almost every aspect of their life. They were made dependent on government or non-Aboriginal pastoralists or other employers for rations, clothing, blankets, education, living place and living conditions. Decisions were made about them and for them and imposed on them Aboriginal people were made dependent on non-Aboriginal people.

So that, for a complex of reasons, the non-Aboriginal population has in the mass, been nurtured on active and passive ideas of racial superiority in relation to Aboriginal people and which sits well with the policies of domination and control that have been applied The relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were historically influenced by racism. Often of the overt, outspoken and sanctimonious kind; but more often, particularly in later times, of the quiet assumption that scarcely recognises itself. What Aboriginal people have largely experienced is policies nakedly racially-based and in their everyday lives the constant irritation of racist attitudes. Aboriginal people were never treated as equals and certainly relations between the two groups were conducted on the basis of inequality and control.”

(National Report Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody)

Both these quotes are hard words, but they are the truth. As we all know, there have been complaints about so-called “black armband” history and children being taught that Australia has a racist and bigoted past. But, as I said before, we are not saying that there is nothing to be proud of, only that there is also much to be ashamed of. And again I repeat, it is not about guilt, but it has to be about shame. And, if you think about it, it might be better to have a black armband than a white blindfold.

The more recent living history report that has perhaps had even more impact than the Royal Commission is “Bringing Them Home,” the report of the Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, the Stolen Generations inquiry. Few would be unaware of this report and the impact it has had on the public, as shown recently by the scale of the first national Sorry Day, ceremonies across the country and over a million signatures in thousands of Sorry Books.

As I said at the start, history is important. It is where the present comes from. As the Governor-General of Australia, Sir William Deane, said in the inaugural Lingiari Lecture two years ago:

“The past is never fully gone. The present plight, in terms of health, employment, education, living conditions and self-esteem of so many Aborigines, must be acknowledged as largely flowing from what happened in the past. The dispossession, the destruction of hunting fields and the destruction of lives were all related True acknowledgement cannot stop short of recognition of the extent to which disadvantage flows from past injustice and oppression.

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

...I am convinced that until true reconciliation with its indigenous peoples is reached, Australia is a diminished nation.”

And as Linda Burney said in her major speech, “Education Is The Key”:

“For Australia to be able to say that it has truly grown up, reconciliation must be embedded in our social makeup; it must be integral to all our agendas at all levels, from the local level of individual action right through to national commitment to change. In the end what we all want, and what Australia needs to be, is the vision of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation:

A united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and provides justice and equity for all.”

That’s enough telling the truth about this country. Now I want to focus on Aboriginal students in schools.

Everyone knows our youth are our future. The NSW Government Statement of Commitment to Aboriginal People points out that, “Although they represent less than 2% of the population, Aboriginal people make up 32% of youth in custody and 14% of adults in custody.” In other words, the proportion of Aboriginal youth in various forms of official custody is more than double the adult custody rate, which led to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. This is simply frightening and it is why new ways of doing things, collaboration of agencies and negotiated strategies are so important in the area of youth.

We are now dealing with the implications of “Keeping Our Kids At School,” a major report on truancy and suspension of Aboriginal students in NSW schools. The report shows alarming gaps between the perspectives of school staffs and our communities on what is happening in terms of Aboriginal perspectives and what needs to be done. The statistics of Aboriginal retention are still not good enough. The figures on suspension and exclusions of our students are even worse — up to 4 and even 6 times the rates of other students.

There are high incidences of non-attendance of Aboriginal students; some for cultural reasons, some truancy. We have anecdotal evidence of Aboriginal students in NSW who feel that education and employment are not for them —which reminds me of Taree where there were no Aboriginal kids working in the town anywhere. We have other anecdotal evidence of schools making a real effort for Aboriginal students, but to no avail because Aboriginal youth feel there will be no jobs for them so what is the point. In the context of 30% youth unemployment across the country, and even higher in some regions, and the persistence of racist attitudes in some areas, this is understandable.

We have an Aboriginal Education Policy and an Anti-Racism Policy, but we still have evidence of schools seeing rules as more important than racism; there are still instances of Aboriginal students who react to racism and are disciplined or suspended or both, while the other students who provoked the reaction getting away with it. And, as you would be aware, all of this needs to be put in the context of the socio-political climate of the last two years since the March 1996 election: the rise of One Nation, the right wing coming out of the woodwork, a political climate where it is suddenly OK to say anything; Aboriginal people feeling under siege, and on the outer. All of this needs to be understood.

We need new insights to change the way things are done in schools. In particular, schools need to learn how to treat older Aboriginal boys who still tend to feel they are treated like children in some schools. We would hope for real collaboration between agencies in providing attractive and relevant options for the many Aboriginal youth who leave school early because the curriculum seems to offer them nothing. The availability of attractive VET curriculum is a key to resolving this. We need alternatives for some of our kids who find the schooling system alienates them to the point where they find it impossible to participate. This may not just be for our kids, but may work better for young people of other cultures, and for all students. Many people say there is no such thing as Aboriginal pedagogy, just good teaching practice. This wouldn’t be the first time the mainstream has benefited from Aboriginal initiative.

Some years ago Aboriginal kids in western Sydney defined a good teacher as, “someone who likes us and is fair.” You might think that’s not much to ask, but anyone in Aboriginal education can tell you it has not been the story in our schools in the past, or even the present in too many cases. Our

kids need to be able to feel that the school belongs to them as much as to any other students. When we started to rewrite the Department's Aboriginal Education Policy in 1995, the key message loud and clear from all consultations was that Aboriginal students must have the right to be Aboriginal. That also may seem really obvious, but again, it has not been the case in the past. Too many people in schools still think that our Aboriginal students are not really Aboriginal.

To illustrate the experience of too many of our kids in normal schools, right from the start, some years ago a researcher observed teacher-student interaction over a year in a kindergarten class in a school in Adelaide. Three obviously Aboriginal students in that class started the year bright-eyed and eager. By the end of the year they were traumatised, the teacher saw them only as trouble and the other students ostracised them. The point was that the teacher was not racist; she was merely just as ignorant as most other teachers of where Aboriginal kids come from. And like most Australian teachers she failed to recognise the cultural background of these kids because of the widespread assumption that Aboriginal kids in urban classrooms cannot really be Aboriginal — if they live in the cities they must have been somehow assimilated. This is the 'real Aborigine' syndrome, the idea that real Aborigines live in the central desert or Arnhem Land, etc., etc.

This brings me to considering how Montessori and Aboriginal education may converge and be able to help each other. One of the things so many mainstream teachers have trouble with in dealing with Aboriginal kids is precisely the autonomy and cooperative learning styles, looking after sibling and friends and helping each other, that Aboriginal kids bring to school. It is interesting that these are to some extent what Montessori is about. It is also encouraging to see that Montessori is about empowering children and helping them to teach each other; this again lines up with the cooperative learning that Aboriginal kids bring to school from their cultural background. The freedom of movement of the Montessori classroom is again something that is consistent with the autonomy that Aboriginal kids bring to school. So in all these ways Aboriginal education and Montessori are on the same wavelength. In this context it is worth repeating what I said earlier, that some educationists say there is no such thing as Aboriginal pedagogy, just good teaching practice. And of course the point about Aboriginal pedagogy is that it has stood the test of time and experience for up to 100,000 years and more.

In too many of our schools there is too little evidence of real understanding of Aboriginal communities or where Aboriginal students come from. This is because most teachers and school administrators have grown up in White Australia and learnt little or nothing or lies about Aboriginal Australia. And it is because of the failures of teacher training over the years. More than twenty years of reports have called for mandatory Aboriginal Studies in teacher education courses. The AECG is proud to have been Principal Consultant to the national project, "Teaching the Teachers", which was started by the late Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1991. Teaching the Teachers is a model mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject for primary pre-service teacher education courses, with a range of resources. Last year at the Australian Reconciliation Convention, the Director-General stated that Aboriginal Studies should be considered as an employment pre-requisite for all teachers. Universities and systems have had enough time. Mandatory Aboriginal Studies for all teachers needs to happen now.

I want to finish with two stories about my work at Taree that have shown me how we can make a difference and have given me hope. The first is about an Aboriginal boy who, like many of our kids, found the transition from primary school to high school difficult and dropped out after about two weeks. He got into bad company and wound up in Worimi Detention Centre. The Koori Youth Program was running a Streetkids in Distress project, trying to help streetkids and get them back into some form of education or training. But not just education for its own sake, rather, we tried to start from where they were at and get into something they were interested in. For Mark this was art. Art was something he loved. He progressed with his art and became a regular attendee at the program, and even got to the stage of getting back to school part time. One of his paintings was selected for the Department's NAIDOC Week exhibition which travelled round the State. His art

was shown in Japan, and used in the Aboriginal Education Diary. The money he was paid for his copyright he was able to use for clothes and a new bike and bought his mother a washing machine.

The second story is about a Taree schools-community production of the musical, “1788: The Great South Land,” which was developed in collaboration with the AECG, and tells the story of Sydney from both sides, not just the First Fleet but Eora people too. The Manning AECG formed the Manning Valley Australians for Reconciliation and we decided to stage the “Great South Land” and invited schools in the district to be involved. We had over 100 students from five schools and community involved as well. We had a successful season in the Manning Entertainment Centre, and all the schools who refused to join in told us they wished they had been involved. We were invited to Sydney to perform for the Aboriginal Studies Association Conference. Patrick Dodson saw the performance and told the Premier about it when they met next morning to talk about reconciliation in New South Wales. The Premier said, “That’s best practice! We’ll make a video.” And “Nothing’s going to Stop Our Dream” is in every government school in the state. So that is another success story. But what was really inspiring is the kids who were involved in the show and the effect it had on them. Many of them were close to drop-outs; seen as trouble-makers or a waste of time in school; or encouraged to join the production to get them out of class. The real story is what those kids, both black and white, achieved in self-esteem and empowerment, and what they did for Reconciliation.

The understanding that I hope can be generated from this conference is an important step in the right direction. It all helps.

Thank you.