

MINIMBAH PILOT MONTESSORI PRIMARY CLASSROOM

By Peter Erskine

Since arriving in Armidale in January, 2004, I have visited Minimbah Aboriginal school as a volunteer, relief teacher and as a case worker for the Armidale Early Childhood Intervention Service. Classes at Minimbah consist mainly, but not exclusively, of Indigenous children. There are a wide range of ages, abilities and learning styles and significant challenges for the teachers. For a short while I worked with some of the Minimbah primary children in an empty classroom as a way of assisting the teachers. Minimbah began as an preschool funded by Save the Children Fund and its present Director/Principal Mrs Dianne Roberts steered the school from its beginning as a preschool to its present size. She received an Order of Australia in recognition of her work. Today there are 94 enrolled in the primary and 83 in the pre-school. The primary school consists of three active classrooms and one empty classroom. Minimbah receives government funding but in order to remain accessible to all members of the Indigenous community the fees are minimal and the school operates on a limited budget.

I have had many discussions with Dianne about Minimbah and Indigenous education. Dianne understood very quickly the potential of the Montessori approach for assisting Minimbah to meet the varied needs of its students and families. However the goal of a Montessori classroom at Minimbah seemed remote mainly because of the money needed for such a venture and because few Indigenous children attend the local Armidale Montessori preschool. I kept thinking of the empty room and the considerable challenges the teachers seemed to be having in trying to teach large groups of children with their varying ages and needs the same lesson at the same time. Minimbah staff kindly allowed me to observe classes and also to tell the Montessori stories relating to the origin of the Universe and the Time Line of Life. Minimbah has a lot of visitors. Some are genuine volunteers and others proffer thinly disguised pitches and a 'look what I can do for you' attitude. I did not want to fall into the latter category but I had a strong feeling that a Montessori program could bring something valuable to the culture of the school. I also realise that establishing rapport and trust will take a long time. A few experiences of relief teaching and assisting at the school only strengthened my feeling that Montessori would have a lot to offer.

One day I was in the playground helping to supervise some of the younger children who were doing great imitations of lanky basketball dudes with swagger and attitude. They were all of four foot high but quite rough with each other. There was no team work, asking for the ball or sharing it. One simply grabbed the ball and made for the hoop in a direct line - pity anyone in the way. They were tough little boys until they didn't get the ball. There was then great gnashing of teeth followed by the dramatic throwing of ones hat upon the ground and stamping on it. It was simultaneously very funny and rather moving, a re-enactment of a painful story as old as humanity. Mindful of my Montessori ancestors and with the permission of the teacher, I organised the children into a group and began a 'Grace and Courtesy' lesson. It was not of course the first time that an adult had tried to impress upon them the virtue of asking and giving. But I suspect that for many children the lesson is repeatedly delivered with a hefty load of didactic imperative such that it goes in one ear and out the other. Acting it out on the other hand allows the body to inhabit and to give life to the idea rather than being simply colonised by it. The look on their faces was really something - surprise, delight, followed by passion.

So far the story of the Minimbah Montessori classroom has been one moment of serendipity after another. With impeccable timing Megan Tyne contacted me and offered tickets to the Congress for both Mrs Roberts and myself. The Congress was I think a turning point in the formation of the idea of a Montessori program at Minimbah. It began to seem like an idea whose time had come. Megan also indicated the possibility of funding by the Montessori Children's Foundation to assist in the setting up of a pilot Montessori primary classroom at Minimbah. In January I attended a summer course for teachers at the University of New England and met some teachers from the SCEGGs

Redlands Montessori classrooms who have donated some materials and offered the continuing support of their parent body. Recently a retired local Primary school teacher and founding member of the Armidale Bushwalking Club Mr David Lawrence has shared with me the fruits of his passion and commitment for taking students out into the rich natural landscapes that this region has to offer. Continuing discussions with Mrs Roberts and her assistant Mr Tony Simmons have been wide ranging, explorative and imbued with their passion for Indigenous education and their school. Once the Montessori Children's Foundation offered its generous support we were able to take the idea to the community, organising parent information evenings at the school and visiting families at home to explain the approach and its benefits for Minimbah. I was also invited to address a group of women elders. Indigenous communities have a deep distrust and scepticism of the latest new idea brought by the latest white fella to walk through the door and the elders asked some tough questions. It was a valuable experience for me and to listen to their heartfelt expressions of concern for the future of their children. They are the ones who have often to pick up the pieces. There are so few opportunities for meaningful employment that many Indigenous men and adolescent boys hit a wall in the arduous attempt to meet that most fundamental of human needs - finding ones place in the world and feeling pride in oneself. I left the meeting with an insight into the reality that for many Indigenous people the traumas of our shared history are deep and continually present, a continuous rippling of effects and unease. Deep listening is a well that we all desperately need to drink from and during this last year I have often recalled Pat Dodson's metaphor for reconciliation - sitting under the shade of a tree talking to each other.

During this period of discussion, listening and consultation the DVD 'We Share Our Dreams' has probably been the single most effective introduction to Montessori education. It seems to have a lasting impact on everyone who sees it and there has been a deep intuitive response to the dreams that it expresses. Several copies of the DVD have circulated through the community and there has emerged a current of good will and the intention to give it a go that is carrying us along with it. I usually show the DVD first and then talk a little about Montessori education and the characteristics of the classroom. However it is Tony who explains it best. He articulates a clear understanding of the implications of Montessori education for Indigenous children explaining the importance of a well rounded education, developing a passion for learning along with the fundamental skills that will carry them through the very real challenges of high school. Last year, for example, in the North Eastern region of NSW 95 Indigenous students were suspended or expelled from high schools. The obstacles are greater for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. Dianne, Tony and myself are convinced that the hands on approach will meet an untapped need amongst the Indigenous students and that the emphasis upon independence will complement Indigenous parenting styles that expect much more independence from younger children than is usually required in non-Indigenous families.

Selecting the students has been a delicate process and we have emphasised that the program will give the school greater flexibility in catering for diverse learning styles and that this first group of children will form the core of a learning community. The community and the teachers will need to be reassured that the Montessori classroom is not some kind of streamed program, that it results in tangible improvements in literacy and numeracy, and that it will in fact benefit the whole school. Indeed it seems clear that the new Montessori classroom will be sustainable, will not be a strain on already scarce resources in the school, will result in an immediate easing of student numbers in at least one of the other classrooms, as well as helping a slight increase in enrolments due to the word getting out into the community. Ultimately the success of the Montessori program will be largely determined by the extent to which it can generate support in the wider community, and can integrate with the rest of the school while maintaining its essential Montessori characteristics.

At the time of writing the classroom is due to open in two days. My partner, Robyn, who is as enthusiastic about this venture as I am, has helped with the transformation of a classroom into a learning environment. Her mother, Luise, who visited us recently has been helping to make language materials. The first consignment of Montessori materials purchased by the Montessori

Children's Foundation arrived two weeks ago. I have scoured Armidale for furniture and the seemingly endless things one needs to create a Montessori environment. There are new and not so new shelves and desks. Every piece of the material has been placed upon the shelves carefully and then two thirds have been removed to cupboards ready for a gradual reintroduction over the next few weeks and months.

The room stands on a slight rise looking over the eastern streets of Armidale to the hills in the north. Beyond those hills is spectacular gorge country and the World Heritage Area of New England National Park. About 15 minutes drive from the school towards the east is Gara Gorge. Both these areas will I am sure be the destination for many an excursion and many a chat beneath the shade of a tree. I know that there will be many challenges. It is new territory for the students, for the school, and for myself. The class will begin with 12 students between the ages of 5 and 8 and none of these students have been through a Montessori preschool. I anticipate that for many children the journey from passive recipient to self-motivated learner will take some time. However there is no reason why we cannot enjoy the scenery on the way. Maria Montessori understood that the first duty of the teacher is to light the flame of interest in the student. Only then will true learning and independence be possible.