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Submitted to **Social and Cultural Determinants of Indigenous Health**
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Publishing/Privacy Statement and Your Details

1 What is your title? eg. Ms, Mr, Dr.

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If you have concerns or a request about the way your submission may be used, please contact us on MyLifeMyLead@health.gov.au or provide further information below.:

N/A

7 Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?

Non-Indigenous

8 What is your gender?

Female

9 What is your occupation?

Occupation:
Executive Director, Montessori Australia Foundation & Montessori Children's Foundation

10 Are you willing to be contacted by a representative from the Australian Government Department of Health if they have any further questions or clarifications?

Yes

11 Please indicate if you would need an interpreter, and in which language.

Language:
N/A

12 Are you making this submission as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?(Skip the rest of this page, if you are doing an individual submission)

Organisation

13 What is your position/job title in this organisation?

Position:

Executive Director

14 What is your organisation?**Organisation:**

Montessori Children's Foundation

15 What type of organisation is it?

Community organisation

16 What is the role of your organisation?**Organisation role:**

MCF aims to make the benefits of Montessori education available to children and communities that would otherwise be unable to access it due to remoteness, poverty or disadvantage. Our primary focus at present is to establish and support Montessori early learning opportunities in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, mostly in Queensland. MCF enters into partnerships with community organisations to provide high quality early childhood services, which are designed to empower parents and alloparents to foster maximal development in their children across all domains, and to provide support for members of each community to train as Montessori educators to ensure that programs are stable over time.

17 Where does your organisation operate? (select the most appropriate answer options)

National

State/Territory:

NSW

postcode:

2099

Suburb/Town/Community:

Dee Why

18 If you or your organisation are making a representation on behalf of another organisation or group, please tell us who it is and its role.**Other organisation:**

N/A

Connection to family, community, country and culture

1 We are looking for experiences, ideas and evidence that show how connection to family, community, country and culture can be enhanced or maintained. Please tell us your story.

Culture story:

2 What are your key recommendation(s)? (one sentence per recommendation please) What needs to happen?

culture_recommendations:

3 References: If there is a published paper, a website, a trial or an evaluation that shows the impacts of your recommendation(s), please enter this information below.

Culture references:

4 Is this recommendation about...?

5 If this entry also relates strongly to one or more of the other determinants of health, please select which ones below. There is no need to re-enter the same information under different categories.

6 Upload further supporting documents here, should you wish to.

culture upload:

No file was uploaded

Early childhood development, education and youth

1 We are looking for experiences, ideas and evidence that show how to strengthen early learning, educational engagement and achievement. Please tell us your story.

education story:

For the last ten years, the Montessori Children's Foundation (MCF) has been working with a number of remote Aboriginal (largely in Cape York) and Torres Strait Islander communities, to develop, through partnerships with families and community organisations, Montessori early childhood services.

MCF was established in 2005 and received early support from donations from the Montessori community, family foundations and corporate support from RedJet (Virgin Australia). Its subsequent work was greatly enhanced by a significant bequest from Leslie Charles Masterman, which was previously subject to a lengthy legal challenge. In an attempt to finalise the case, the Supreme Court of Queensland ordered the establishment of a two-year Pilot Scheme which trialled the Montessori approach with a pre-school program at Cairns West State School, in a class where the majority of the students were from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families. The Pilot aimed to assess whether Montessori principles of teaching were appropriate for the provision of pre-school education to Indigenous children in remote communities and to suggest future directions for the application of the trust funds to meet the objectives of Mr Masterman's will.

Montessori leaders used this time to consult and build relationships with some key communities and leaders in Cape York and the Torres Strait, and to introduce the Montessori approach for their consideration. Advice was sought from community leaders about what they wanted for their children, and what they saw as the barriers to better outcomes for children and families; in return, information about Montessori education and what it might have to offer was provided. In so doing MCF embarked on a journey of building shared knowledge, insights and understandings, which became the hallmark of all future operations.

The evaluation of the Pilot Scheme, which showed extremely positive impacts for children and drew high praise and support from their families, assisted in the final resolution of the case in 2006, leading to the Masterman bequest being settled in favour of the creation of the Masterman Montessori Indigenous Children's Trust with MCF appointed as trustee and the development of initiatives in remote Indigenous communities in far north Queensland.

The model

Because of the terms of the Masterman bequest, which required that only the interest on the bequest monies could be used for project development, MCF was unable to invest in building specialist Montessori facilities in communities. Instead, the Foundation needed (and needs) to develop partnerships with organisations in remote communities, principally schools and early childhood facilities, to co-locate services. While this in some ways slowed the process of establishing programs, the overwhelming benefit has been that the Foundation must continue to expand, enhance and refine its efforts to build partnerships with stakeholders in communities at all levels. Moreover, building solid partnerships that lead to shared responsibility and shared problem-solving, and building evidence of the effectiveness on the programs developed via them, demands a pace that accommodates the needs of all partners, but creates a strong base for future work.

The eventual outcome was a model of engagement with communities comprising these steps:

- The Foundation's Community Liaison Officer (CLO) identifies and makes contact with significant community leaders, explaining what MCF can offer and seeking an opportunity to visit the community in question for further discussion and to make contact with the wider community.
- The first in-community contact usually takes the form of a week-long visit by the CLO with a series of meetings and presentations for all stakeholders (parents, extended family, the school, the clinic or health service, community kindergartens or playgroups, parents support groups etc), involving both formal presentations and less formal get-togethers where issues can be explored in more detail.
- Time is made available to speak to community members and key organisations one-on-one, and to discuss what the development of a partnership might mean, including the principles (below) on which MCF works.
- By the end of the visit, the CLO makes an offer to the community to make contact again if they would like further information, or to proceed with the development of a partnership.
 - o This means that anyone in the community can make contact for further discussion, clarification or advice, but also allows time for any decision about future action to be made on the ground without the pressure of an "outsider's" scrutiny or a deadline.
- Some of the communities MCF has worked with have sought a range of further information prior to making a decision, including requesting to see Montessori programs in action elsewhere in the country, being provided with a workshop in the Montessori approach by a qualified and experienced Montessori trainer, and increasingly in recent years, visiting an established Montessori program in another community to see it in action, and to talk to parents and teachers. MCF sees it as a core part of its business to meet such requests so that decisions, if and when they are made, are as fully informed as possible.

Underpinning this model is a set of principles that inform the development of all MCF initiatives:

- MCF will ensure that programs offered in communities meet the same quality standards as Montessori programs anywhere else in the world.
- Once established, the partnership will endure until the community makes a decision to withdraw.
 - o In practice this means that MCF's commitment to work with any community to establish high quality services, once begun, will continue despite obstacles, set-backs or interruptions.
- The sustainability of programs will be assured in large measure by investing in quality training for members of the local community as Montessori teachers and assistants.
- Mentoring support for newly qualified teachers and assistants from the community will be assured, and will be maintained over time.
- Access to professional development will be made available by attendance at conferences/refreshers, the provision of workshops, and by community visits from experts in various fields.

The focus on early childhood

The Montessori approach to education is firmly based in an analysis of child development, and works from the key assumptions that children are born to learn, that their primary motivation for learning is to take their place within their family and community, that young children learn best by doing, and especially by engaging in activities that develop their senses, that new learning is successful only if it is built on solid foundations, and that while all children follow the same developmental trajectories (unless, of course, there are serious medical conditions that prevent this occurring) they do not necessarily all follow the same developmental timetables. In Montessori education, the early years have always been seen as the most critical for development both within the family and within the school, a foundation for all that follows. Montessori programs focus on fostering the development of each child at his or her own pace, with a focus on children discovering for themselves, step by step, how to do something.

The key elements in all Montessori environments are the specialist didactic materials, each designed to isolate a concept or skill in a particular area (in the early years, the focus is on control of movement, communication, self-discipline and independence); and the trained adults who demonstrate, observe, assist when necessary, and ensure that each child moves through the sequence of developmental activities in all areas over the three-year period, at a pace determined by each child, which ensures learning in each area is sequential, successful and that each child is building on a firm foundation when they encounter new materials. Peer teaching is also encouraged, so that over a three-year span, all children have the opportunity to experience different roles and responsibilities in relation to each other, enhancing both their sense of security and their sense of compassion and competence. While children are free to choose what they work on, the teacher's role is critical in introducing new challenges; in addition, because there is only one piece of each material in the room, children learn to take turns, and to wait if something they want is not immediately available.

In Montessori early childhood environments, it is usual to see children working individually more often than in groups, so that each can actually learn at his or her own pace without the pressure of comparison/competition. As a consequence, the environments are most often quiet and peaceful places, where love of learning and sense of one's own capability flourishes.

MCF began to work in partnership with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at a time when there was an explosion in research literature around early childhood and its significance to the health, development and social and economic outcomes of the individual over the life course. Not only did this research tease out the consequences of negative experiences in early childhood, it began to provide hard scientific evidence to support the observations that Maria Montessori had made a century earlier when developing her approach to education, including evidence that organising learning according to chronological age groups may well be counter-productive.

Making a start

The Montessori approach is based around working with children in a three-year age range (birth to age 3; 3-6 and so on), and many public schools find accommodating these arrangements challenging. In the communities we work with however, both pre-prep and prep programs were and are offered and so the challenges of establishing a Montessori early childhood program were not as daunting. In addition, there was a wealth of evidence around poor outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in both the early and the primary years, with gaps in literacy and numeracy that proved to be major impediments to success in or completion of the compulsory years of schooling, which contributed to the prospect of high quality early childhood programs being welcomed.

On the basis of these circumstances, as well as the positive evaluation of the Cairns West Pilot Scheme, MCF was delighted to be able to develop its first partnership with the Thursday Island campus of Tagai State College in the Torres Strait.

At the same time, MCF was eager to establish a program in Cape York, and made a start by developing school holiday programs for children aged under seven in partnership with the Koolkan Childcare Centre in Aurukun, staffed by experienced Montessori teachers from around Australia who volunteered their services. MCF's relationship with the Aurukun community has been maintained for many years, and resulted eventually in a decision to provide staff in the Childcare Centre with support and advice about incorporating Montessori approaches into their programs in early 2016.

Montessori in the Torres Strait

Pre-school programs

MCF developed a partnership with both the Torres Strait Islanders Regional Education Council (TSIREC) and Tagai State College to commence with a single Montessori program for children on Thursday Island in the prep and pre-prep years. In the first year - following extensive community consultations, and a range of events, including a two-week introductory Montessori training program open to all adults in the community, and a decision by TSIREC that they wanted a Montessori alternative offered in the College - over half of all parents enrolling their children in prep and pre-prep on Thursday Island chose the Montessori option. The following year demand was so high that a second Montessori classroom was required.

Strait Start infant and toddler programs

The impact of the program was further enhanced with the opening on the school premises of the first of what came to be known as Strait Start programs. These were modelled on the Montessori 0-3 programs, although they catered for children up to the commencement of pre-prep. The programs were designed to give the youngest children in the community a specially prepared environment to foster their development, but also, and equally importantly, to enable the parents and alloparents (who must accompany the children and remain with them throughout each session) to share the experiences with them, to learn about the materials and their functions, to develop a deeper insight into children's development and how it can be supported through a range of activities - many of which can be replicated at home - and to take those understandings home to share with family and community.

In fact, in many ways, the children's parents and alloparents are the most important attendees.

Strait Start programs were a great success from the outset, and now, in 2017, 10 of the fifteen inhabited islands in the Torres Strait have a Strait Start program and there is a Montessori childcare centre on yet another.

Strait Start programs operate from 9-12, 3-5 days per week, are free of charge, and can be attended by any child in the community accompanied by any member of the extended family (alloparents) with a responsibility for the child, on any or every day. The programs are usually accommodated on school premises, and always equipped with high quality Montessori materials and well-cared for outdoor spaces. (An indirect benefit of this co-location is that children quickly become used to going to the school, making the transition to Pre-prep and Prep much easier for both children and families).

Many Montessori materials are made by the program coordinator, and this enables the social, cultural and natural environment to be reflected and incorporated in the classroom and its activities. Elders from the community and others provide experiences of traditional music, singing and dancing for the children, and in many, children are engaged in activities outside the centre, using the beaches, gardens and open spaces of their island home environments, and showcasing their activities to the wider community. Most Strait Start programs have built relationships with the child health services of the Torres Strait, and with other family support services, and can facilitate access to this support via the program, as well as promoting the use of such services, making brochures and advice available

in both English and Torres Strait Creole.

All staff in Strait Start programs are members of their local communities. They are chosen for the role by the elders of their home islands, indicating that they are respected and trusted. All staff members have completed or are undertaking Montessori early years training, and are supported by a range of qualified and highly experienced Montessori mentors.

The impact of both the Montessori pre-school programs and Strait Start was apparent almost immediately, and captured in both freely offered opinions expressed to the CLO by a range of community members, as well as those recorded in formal interviews with parents/alloparents, for example:

"We come every day – my little girl loves it. She can do things here that she doesn't do at home because we don't have all the equipment. And she's so independent now, she wants to do things on her own all the time. I used to do everything for them – I didn't want them to make a mess and I'd scream at them because of the mess they made and them climbing up on things all the time. But now I know that's how they learn, and here it's very calm and quiet so I'm trying to change. I let them do things themselves now. It was hard to do – I did everything for the oldest boy. Lizzie will be more independent than him. Tom asks Mum to get him a drink; Lizzie gets her own." Mother of child aged 2

"I thought it would be the same as childcare but it's very different– much better. They have real objects here and the children learn how to handle things and how to be careful. It's good that parents are here to see this. I like to sit and watch Sally as she learns, and she remembers what she's learned the next day. I'm surprised by the way she can do the puzzles and how she remembers to put things away. She's learned more than my other kids did at this age. And I learn new things here then try to do them at home and show them to my other children." Mother of child aged 3

It's different from what I expected – I thought it would be like childcare. But here they are learning, not just playing – there are activities here I never saw at the childcare centre. It gives me new ideas about what I can do with Angela at home – she's happier."

Mother of child aged 11 months

And from parents with children in the pre-school program (pre-prep and prep) on Thursday Island:

- 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 the age of 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.

A strong degree of commitment to expanding Montessori education in the Torres Strait was expressed in the address given by the chair of the Torres Strait Islander's Regional Education Council at the inaugural summit on Montessori education in the Torres Strait Nation organised by TSIREC in 2014, and entitled Advance the Child, Advance the Nation.

Invitations to academics, community representatives and other stakeholders included the following statement:

"The Torres Strait Nation has embraced Montessori education as a vehicle through which to achieve a longheld 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... 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. "

In 2012, the Torres Strait nation was delighted to see that measurements made via what was then known as the Australian Early Development Index, and which mapped children's development in their first year of school across five domains (physical health and well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge, showed a vast improvement over the previous data collected three years earlier.

AEDI Outcomes Torres Strait

Vulnerable in one or more domains

2009: 59.9%

2012: 35.5%

Vulnerable in two or more domains

2009: 39.2%

2012: 22.2%

While we would not claim that the introduction of Montessori programs to the Torres Strait was alone responsible for the change, we do believe that the level and seriousness of community wide discussions around the importance of early childhood development, and the range of actions that flowed from them were, in a not insignificant way, a consequence of the partnership between MCF, TSIREC, and Tagai State College.

Montessori in Cape York

Although MCF has sustained relationships with other Cape York communities, including Pormpuraaw, Mapoon and Aurukun over the years, and will continue to do so, our most successful partnership in Cape York has been forged with the Lockhart River community, in particular the Puuya Foundation, over the last 3 years.

Lockhart River

Some years ago, the Puuya Foundation was established in Lockhart River, an extremely remote community on the northeast coast of the Cape, in response to the urgent need to build community capacity in a planned and sustained way. Working with the Puuya Foundation has allowed MCF to build on already well-established foundations, and to play a role in a genuinely extraordinary transformation of a community.

See the story of their work here: <http://www.puuya.foundation/>

A key part of Puuya's vision is to prioritise education, to respond to the foundational nature of early years' development and engagement, and to support parents and families in their critical roles. As a result, the Foundation has worked tirelessly to develop an outstanding centre known as Kuunchi Kakana (Families Together) that provides for co-located family and childhood support services, including an early years learning facility (<http://www.puuya.foundation/our-projects/kuunchi-kakana/>).

With the development of the Centre itself underway, Puuya Foundation began to search for the early years learning program they believed would best serve their children and parents. As part of that process, a delegation from the Foundation attended the Torres Strait Summit on Montessori education, following an initial visit made to Lockhart River by MCF's Community Liaison Officer.

Their response to what they encountered in the Torres Strait was so overwhelmingly positive that they returned to Lockhart River with a recommendation that a partnership be developed with MCF to begin training staff for the centre due to be opened in 2016.

An initial training program based on the Montessori Assistants Training model was made available to the community, and tailored to suit the needs of those attending, in terms of balancing their other commitments to employment and family care. The training, which is usually conducted over a two week period, was instead delivered in three sessions over a six month period with multiple opportunities for hands on learning as part of the process, including immediately taking action in the existing centre to make changes of benefit to the children.

This was followed up in the periods between the training sessions with visits from the trainer acting as a mentor, so that skills and understandings were refined and those undertaking the training could observe positive changes emerge week by week. The training program was opened to anyone in the community with an interest in attending, and, as a result, not only did those already employed in the existing centre take part, but also mothers, aunts and grandmothers of children who attended. Of the 17 women who commenced the course, 16 completed and graduated at the end of the six months, and attendance at the existing centre boomed.

MCF's Community Liaison Officer conducted interviews with the parents of the children attending the centre when the training program was nearing completion, and found overwhelming support for the changes that had already been made. Parents interviewed ranged in age from a teenager who had recently lost custody of her two children, to grandmothers in their fifties and sixties. While individual circumstances varied considerably, many of those interviewed were concerned about living in overcrowded housing, and aspired to a better future for their children, which they almost universally associated with success at school. They were appreciative of the changes they could already see happening in the early years program:

- I can see lots of changes in the program since the Montessori training, there are more activities and different ones like music and painting; the boys want to come every day. They know where to put things, and I can see them learning to take responsibility for themselves. There's very little fighting or squabbling.
- I've seen a lot of changes in children's behaviour; they're more helpful to each other, and at home, they don't take things without asking.
- The children learn a lot about books; they're asking me to read to them now at home.
- I have a better understanding of the changes happening to the kids at different ages; it's made me a better parent.
- It's making me a better mum, more patient. I had problems with my temper before, but now I'm calming down.
- I encourage others to come now too – not just the mums, dads can come too.
- I'm really glad we chose Montessori – it's more focussed on the children's needs and it's going to be a help when I have the new baby. It's great, very different. You're not rushing, you're going at the child's pace; it makes the adult more patient.

A new round of interviews will be conducted shortly, now that the new centre is up and running, and the program has relocated to it.

Conclusion

MCF's experiences have strengthened our view that the key to being able to improve outcomes for children lies in building the capacity of adults in the community – parents, extended family, service providers and decision-makers – to appreciate and respond effectively to the needs of children as they grow and change. It is clear that short term projects which deliver to children without engaging the adults in their lives, may provide short term benefits, but do little or nothing to change children's developmental environments, or the nature of their pathways to adulthood over the long-term.

What does make such change possible is to work consistently, and over the long term, and to work respectfully with adults in the community who have the desire to see improvements in their children's development and life chances.

This is the core of the Puuya Foundation's vision, and has been pursued now with great commitment for well over a decade. The result is a growing body of women and men in the Lockhart River community with not only the capacity to see that changes need to be made for the benefit of children, and ultimately the future security of the community, but also the skills to analyse the key areas of need, and to identify the strategies likely to be effective; to enrol and enthuse other members of the community in working productively together; and to bring to the work the determination to sustain their efforts over time.

The partnership MCF is engaged in with the Puuya Foundation is embedded in this vision and approach.

Challenges continue however, not least the constantly changing funding models for initiatives in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the limited nature of recurrent funding needed to make fundamental and enduring change. In addition, and despite many years of in-principle support from governments, there remains alarmingly little collaboration and communication between services and government departments. It is often an overwhelming struggle for organisations with innovative approaches to make themselves heard, and to be able to demonstrate both their strengths and their needs.

This is certainly the case for Montessori education, not only in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, but also more generally around the country. There are, however, no communities more in need of innovative, adaptable and developmentally targeted programs that include such a specific focus on working with the child and his or her family than those communities we work with in MCF.

We have demonstrated our capacity to provide high quality programs that enjoy great support among community members and encourage not only children but also their families to love their learning experiences. However, we need substantial support to be able to extend our reach.

2 What are your key recommendation(s)? (one sentence per recommendation please) What needs to happen?

education recommendations:

- Provide significant and secure funding support to enable the expansion of Montessori early childhood programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Urgently develop mechanisms that will enable those wanting to train as Montessori teachers to have their Montessori training counted as part of their Bachelor of Education studies.
- Investigate how greater numbers of public schools may be able to make the choice to offer Montessori programs either as a part, or as the whole of their pedagogic approach.
- Foster and support the growth of capacity building initiatives such as the Puuya Foundation has undertaken, and facilitate the involvement of other key partner organisations.

3 References: If there is a published paper, a website, a trial or an evaluation that shows the impacts of your recommendation(s), please enter this information below.

education references:

4 Is this recommendation about...?

Early childhood education

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education upload:

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