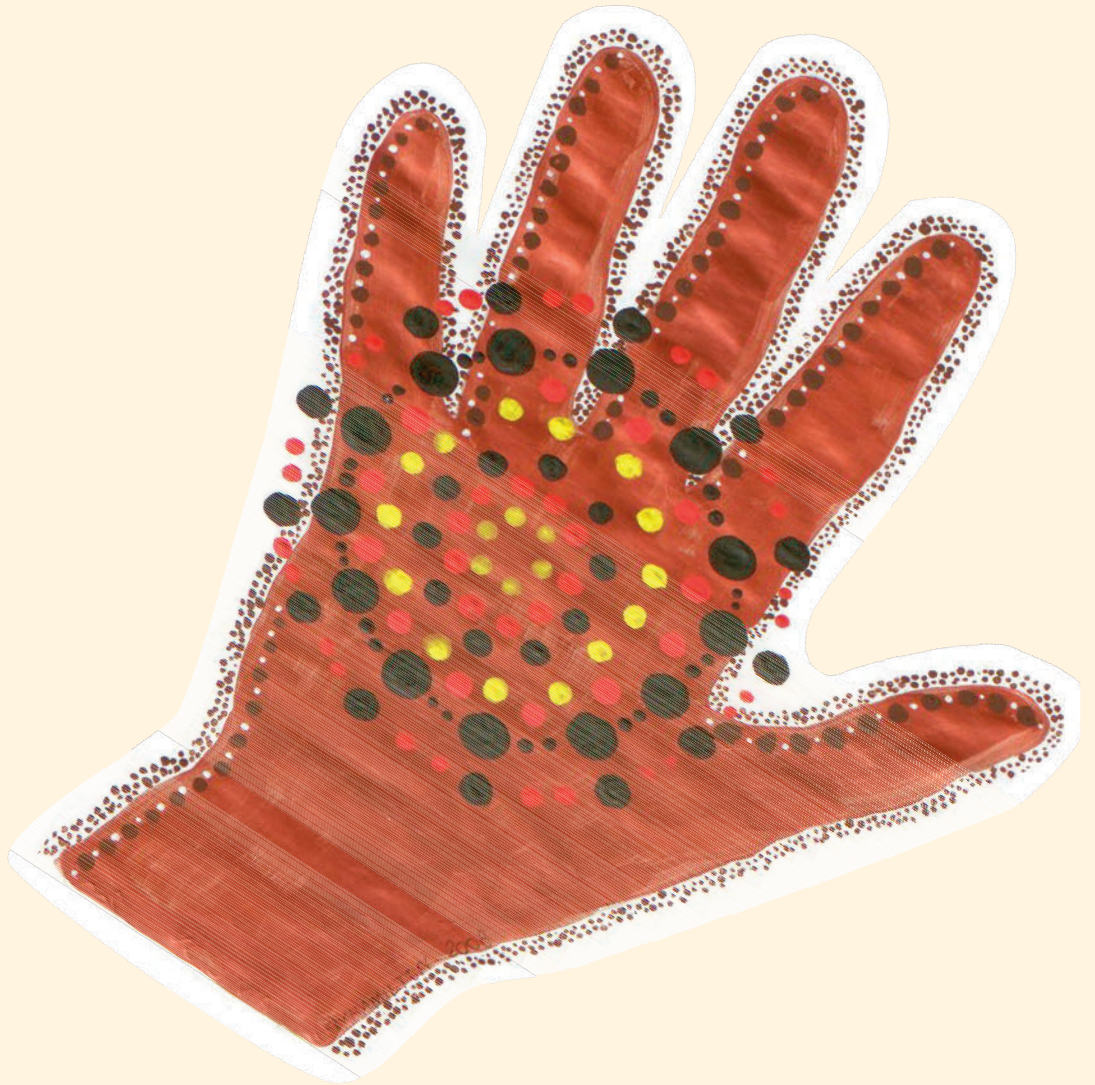


Deadlier with a Degree!



True Stories, Many Voices



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are warned that the following stories may refer to deceased persons.

We, the authors of these stories, pay respect to the many students who experienced personal and family loss or major health issues during our study.



True Stories,
Many Voices,
Deadlier with a Degree!

As told by

*Leah, Frayne, Michelle, May May, Angie, Maxine, Will,
Robyn, Sue, Danielle, Bethanie and Michael*

Alma Fleet and Rosalind Kitson
Institute of Early Childhood
Macquarie University
2009

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All artwork in this publication is copyright by the artist Michelle Hamilton.

She wrote:

I think the artwork should be what the goals have been for all of us throughout this journey, reaching for our goals and following our paths together to get there.

The borders reflect the road, the path and the track

The hand is called -“To Reach”

The Tree- “Growth”

The Stories, Many Voices – “Rise Up”

Small Circle – “Circle of Woman”



Acknowledgements

Deadlier with a Degree is a tribute to persistence and resilience. It brings together a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait early childhood teachers from across Australia to share their stories of hope and survival in pursuing dreams of a university degree. Others also studied with these story-tellers and are part of the journey; we acknowledge their untold stories as well.

We acknowledge that we have been granted permission in writing to use the names, pseudonyms, images and stories included in this work. This includes acknowledgment and recognition of those who may no longer be with us.

This publication addresses the significant national goals for Indigenous education of a number of Australian governments' programs including the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (endorsed by all Australian governments) and the *Reconciliation Action Plan*. 'Closing the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' is a major aim of government.

The MCEETYA report, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*, cited the engagement of Indigenous children and young people in learning, as systemic "core business" and identified early childhood education; school-community partnerships; quality teaching; and pathways to training, employment and higher education as critical to this engagement. *The IHEAC Strategic Plan 2006-2008* aim of improving Indigenous outcomes and enhancing Indigenous culture and knowledge in Australian higher education is mirrored for early childhood in the Commonwealth's *Indigenous Child Care Services Plan*.

This publication intervenes in these issues of access, equity, participation and outcomes of Indigenous education in both higher education and early childhood. In aiming to increase Indigenous participation in teacher education and in early childhood teaching, it assists in implementing these national educational goals as well as DEEWR's Office of Early Education and Child Care's 2008 *National Early Years Workforce Strategy*. The Indigenous success stories told here, are the coal-face of these government programs "closing the gap".



As well as acknowledging the story-tellers, it is important to recognise the people and places where many of the stories took place, including local communities. The story-tellers are all graduates of Macquarie University, having studied through the Institute of Early Childhood, and Warawara, Department of Indigenous Studies. This is where these stories took place, but stories like them will also be told at your local college or university.

In particular, we acknowledge the contributions of Ross Hughes, Tracey Hill [Harbour] and Bevan Cassidy, who helped develop this particular program with local communities and worked towards its success.

We also wish to acknowledge the thoughtful contributions from Christine Baxter, the editorial consultant, Natalie Burns and Karina Sinclair who assisted with liaison during the project. We also wish to express our appreciation to Macquarie University and DEST for their funding of the earlier research component of this project which allowed these stories to be told. In bringing this project to completion we also wish to acknowledge funding from the Institute of Early Childhood Foundation, and NSW Community Child Care and Children's Services Central.

Finally, these are stories of Indigenous people who have graduated from university as early childhood teachers, people who thought they might never have such an opportunity. We would like to thank them for their time, patience, humour and commitment. Without their voices, there are no stories.

Alma Fleet and Rosalind Kitson



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True Stories

We're telling you our stories.
True stories.
By real people.

You can see who we are. You can hear our voices,
listen to our lives. We're telling how come we went to
uni, what it was like to get there, what it was like being
there and how we feel about getting our degrees. Some
of us already worked with kids but we're all qualified
early childhood teachers now. We've taken our piece
of paper and gone back home. We're working with our
kids, working in our communities, making a difference.

We're telling you our stories. Good stories, learning
stories, hard stories, struggle stories, support stories,
getting through stories. We did it. We got there!

We're telling you our stories.

Now you make your own.





M. HAMILTON · 2008



M. HAMILTON · 2008

On a Journey: True stories, Many voices

About these stories

The true stories told here were written by some members of a group of 25 people (23 women and 2 men) who together, graduated from university as early childhood teachers. Before they came to uni, many were working with young children in preschools and child care centres in their communities, in remote, rural and urban areas. Some left their families and communities and jobs to travel to Sydney (some for the first time ever) for study-block periods — four times a year. Then they went home and continued their studies and assignments with help from study mentors.

It was all new and scary for some. Most didn't know each other. They were all different ages (ranging from 22 - 55 years) and came from many different places across Australia. But they all wanted to become teachers and so they came to Sydney, they studied at home, they did the work and they got their degrees — their “piece of paper”.

Here, they tell their stories — in their own words and in their own voices. These are real stories, true stories, that take you, the reader / listener, along all the different tracks of their shared journey — their tracks to becoming a teacher and getting a university degree.

The tracks stop at 4 resting points on the journey, and the storytellers look back over the country they've covered. These 4 parts of the journey focus on deciding to go; getting there; getting through everything and getting the rewards at the end.

The first part— **We decided to go to uni** — shows how important peoples' families were, in these decisions. Maxine tells about her mum, Frayne her dad and Michelle and May May, their aunties. Here they also tell the stories of why they wanted to do it. Some of these are hard stories to read because school was tough times, but they also tell stories of courage, of wanting to make a difference, of wanting something better for the kids they would teach and for themselves.

The second part— **You're not alone and there's help** — tells the stories of making friends and getting support from the other students, of growing in self-confidence, of asking for help and of getting encouragement from the uni lecturers. It also tells of the various roles of the university's Indigenous Support Unit. Most universities have one of these units. They usually provide a caring space and

knowledgeable staff members who understand what uni is like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Indigenous staff from Support Units look out for Indigenous students and know how to lend a hand. Like Maxine said, “to be in a room with so many other black students, in the same field or all studying for the same degree, was very mind blowing”.

The third part— **So you can do it too** — is the message these authors want to send. They are all convinced that if they could do it, others can too. Maureen “proved” it. Maxine shows how the students made it “our program, our journey” and Leah did it even with a hearing loss and despite feeling “intimidated” at the beginning. Michelle sums it up, “I could have quite easily made excuses....but I knew it was just the fear that I had to overcome — and did”.

The final part— **And it’s worth it** — echoes the first. It talks of how these graduates are making a difference and not only for young children. They feel they are role models, a source of strength in their communities and beyond. They have also gained something personally: both the “pride and satisfaction” of doing well and the “opening doors” to jobs and career that come with a university degree.

The journey ends “**Yarnin’ with Michael**”. He has told his whole story talking, not writing. (So italics are used for his story and occasionally for parts of others, to indicate speech). Michael’s story traces the tracks of his journey from hating school to becoming a teacher. It’s a story of hard times, courage and determination where Michael tells us that he thought, “I’m just gunna do this”.

In fact, all these story-tellers must have all thought a similar thing at some point in the journey. They must have thought about themselves and what could be possible — just like you might be thinking, as you read this.

What *you think* is what counts. That’s the most important thing these stories are saying. They aren’t whispering “nuh, I can’t do that”. These stories are yelling, loud and deadly, “We did, you can too!”.





“The first time away from home — especially at my age!”

Leah’s Story

I feel that all my life, I was the assistant in whatever work that I was involved in and through that, there was no way I could do a University course, especially at my age, going back to studies after all these years.

I was working and doing everything that qualified teachers were doing but not getting the recognition and pay for the work.

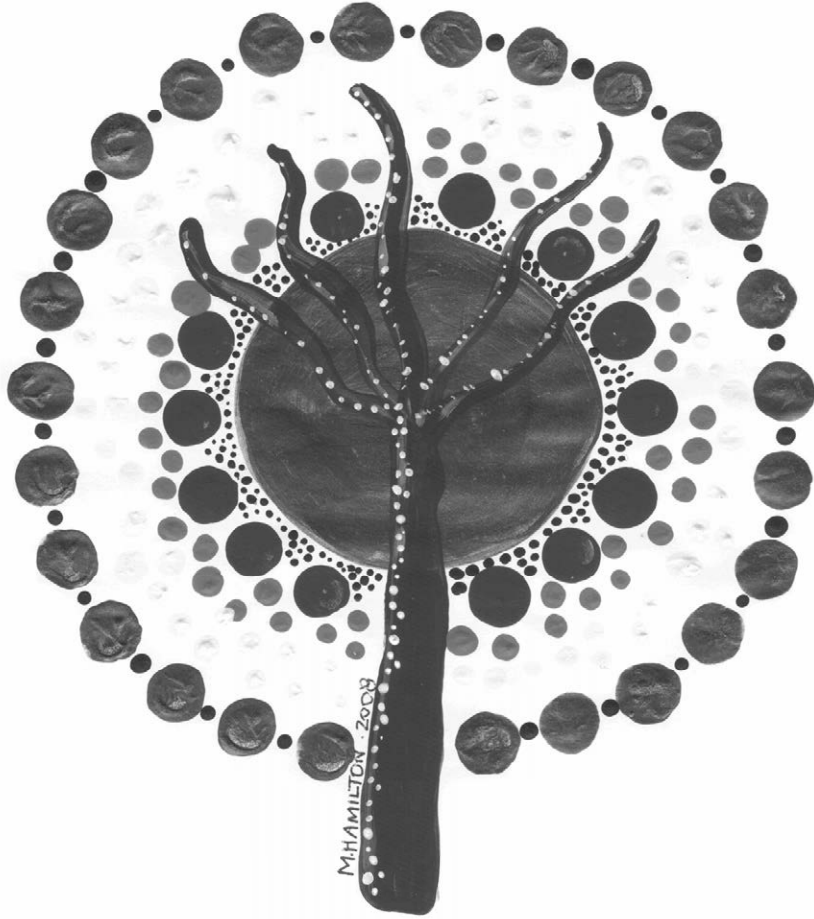
Then the opportunity arose in doing this course. The main pull was that it was an Indigenous program and I felt that it would help me get through the program, with people that would make me feel comfortable.

The hurdles that you had to go through were scary at first, travelling away from home. Some students, this was the first time away from home, first time in a big city and even the first time on a plane. A big step for most of us.

This course has showed that you are never too old to achieve your dreams. Never say never. You can achieve anything that you put your mind to do. Don’t let a handicap hold you back, but remember to inform people, not to use this as an excuse, but to help people understand where you are at.

This course has educated both students and teaching staff to learn from each other — both educational side and cultural side. We’ve taken away a better understanding of teaching children of all cultures and of teaching about your own culture, being proud of who and what you are.





We wanted something more

“My Mum said, ‘you’re not a teacher’”

Danielle

I was working at a preschool as an untrained childcare worker at the time. For quite a while I had been considering furthering my education in the field, when a comment from a four-year-old was a huge wake-up call!

It was pack-away time and I approached the child to ask him to help pack away. The child replied, “My mum said ‘you’re not a teacher’”. I thought to myself, ‘Well, I program, write observations, supervise and run group times, just as the teacher does. Why aren’t I respected for this?’ This incident was important to me becoming a qualified early childhood teacher because it gave me the push and inspired me to move forward and aim high. This meant recognition through study.

“Wow, I’d like to be like her one day”

Frayne

I can remember when I was at school, I was fifteen years of age and we did this work experience program at the school and I decided to do my work experience at the local preschool. So I went there and I had a great experience with teaching the Brewarrina children at the pre-school and also the kindness that the teacher had shown the children. I thought, ‘Wow, I’d like to be like her one day’ as I walked outside the door on my last day —
re-entering the pre-school as the Director, 26 years later!

“I just wanted to better myself because I knew I could do it”

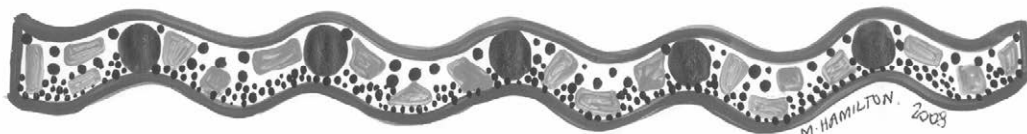
Will

Back in 1976, when I finished high school, I was gunna go to uni then but I decided not to, and went to work here in a local kids' place. With Aboriginal kids and, sort of went from there.

The issue for me was...I was a child care worker at the time. I had worked in the field of Early Childhood for eighteen years. It was getting boring because there was no change in the workplace for child care workers and I felt like the job was going nowhere. This was important to me for two other reasons: the lack of male teachers in the childcare industry, and I just wanted to better myself because I knew I could do it.

In 1993 I heard about a Rural Aboriginal Program (RAP) that was available. I was interested in this program, so when the Expression of Interest form was sent out to the child care centre, I filled one out. My family was involved in my decision to apply for this course.

I then joined the RAP Program and then mainstream. In 1995 I pulled out due to family reasons. In 1998 I went into the Early Childhood Services course available through TAFE. I did not like going to NSW TAFE just for a certificate in early childhood. So I decided to get my Bachelor of Teaching degree. I decided to aim higher: To further my career and also to help my community.



Our families were really important

“What Dad said”

Frayne

And so coming up to my sixteenth birthday my father approached me and said, “Now Frances, you have to think about what you’re going to do with your life. Are you going to stay here and continue your education or go away and get a job, or further your education through TAFE?” And I thought about what Dad said and I said, “Well, I really do want to leave town and to get a better education”. So from that point I packed my bag and I went down to Sydney.

“If she could do it, I could too”

Michelle

I was nervous about actually attending a university, and then I had some family start at uni around the same time in another course. This encouraged me, especially my Aunty who started university at 50 years of age and showed me that if she could do it, I could too. She hadn't been to school in close to 40 years! She was right; she went on to get her Masters and me, my Bachelor.

“I phoned my Aunty Angie”

May May

One day I saw an advertisement in Cairns Post Office. There was a vacancy for a Kindy Assistant — where I applied and I got the position. I was working as a cultural teacher in Queensland. One day Aunty Maureen obtained some information at a conference. Then she suggested I phoned my Aunty Angie concerning the course (the Bachelor of Teaching in Early Childhood), so this is where my journey commenced.

“Mum, you can do it”

Angie

When I left school back in 1968, I started work as a Nursing Aide at Thursday Island General Hospital, then left. I lived with my families at Bamaga — I started to work at the Bamaga Hospital.

I started having my children and at the same time looking after my elderly father, and caring for my children. In 1974 I lost my father. I always wanted to study or learn new things, so after my father passed on, I put all my children’s education first.

I started working at the Bamaga Hospital again for a couple of years, then joined the Health Department. I worked for many years, then left the Health Department to start my own business enterprise called *Unwin’s Bakery*. My husband and I sold our business, then I applied for a position in the Health Department to work at one of the Health Centres, but unfortunately I was knocked back.

Then I applied to work at the Bamaga Day Care Centre, because I loved to work with children. I liked to help people, my people; I’m a loving and caring person. (I worked in Hospital, Health Department caring for sick people, helping people with health problems, then the day I was knocked back from this job with Health Department, it really turned me off — all this time I have been working with, helping sick people, I like helping and caring for others.)

I then started to look at helping young children, because I like to work with children, I had six of my own and many grandchildren. I applied to work at Bamaga Day Care Centre, It was there that I heard about this course. My niece, May May rang me up and she asked me “Ama Angie would you like to come down to Sydney to do this course in the Early Childhood program?”

I told May May, “May May, you know I had left school 20 years ago. I can’t do that. Besides, Sydney is so far away for me to go and do this course! Give me time, I’ll get back to you, I’ll think about it”.

Then I gave it some thought. I made up my mind and I agreed to fill in the enrolment form to do this course.

At the time I was up home by myself. My husband, he was down, down south, with our son. He was doing a college course for those couple of years. He was sort of being with him, closer to him, put him into the college while I was up home working, you know, like I'm working and he's down here with our son...there's always support from him and my daughters, like they always support me there, "Mum, you can do it! We know you can do it!", and yes, they always...My husband's always on my back to, you know, support me on this, from family point of view.



“My Mum — beside me in spirit”

Maxine

My mother’s access to education was limited — only went to Grade 6 at a one-teacher school — then went to work as a kitchen hand on properties and in pubs. She was very frustrated that she couldn’t further her education and decided to self educate through reading anything and everything — encyclopaedias, media. When she was young, racism in South Australia was rife and very blatant. This made her even more determined. She not only instilled in me a love of learning, but that education is something that is yours for life, and no one can take it away from you.

My mother’s support was just so important. If she wasn’t on board, I would not have started. I needed to know her support and encouragement was there.

We as students, made great sacrifices — like giving up most of our school holidays, missing being with our children for Mothers Day, missing the NAIDOC* celebrations.

The piece of paper doesn’t show all the blood, sweat and tears that were shed over the five years. Our lives changed in many ways, we had lots of deaths in our families and births — highs and lows — a few times I was ready to walk out. Five years out of my life, our lives....

The saddest part was that my mum was getting older, more frailer and even sicker. Very, very sadly, she passed away three days before Christmas and I graduated the following year.

When I gave the speech on behalf of all the graduating students at our graduation ceremony, I acknowledged her influence and I knew that she was present, beside me in spirit.

* *NAIDOC refers to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day of Commemoration*

We wanted to make a difference for our kids

“When my son was in Year 5”

Leah

This brings me to a story, about when my son was in Year 5 and really didn't know how to deal with who he was and his culture; so when every time someone made a remark about his colour of skin, he would retaliate and start fighting. This went on for a few weeks before I was called in to try to find out why.

After I had spoken to the principal and the teacher involved, the teacher made the comment like... “Well that's how those people deal with problems”. I challenged her — who was she referring to? Her answer was “the dark skin Indigenous people”. I had informed her, that I was of Torres Strait Islander descent and wherever she had her information about the Australian Indigenous people she was wrongly informed. Oh by the way, she was an American exchange teacher.

Things are slowly changing in Education Studies, when the teaching students are taught cultural awareness and Indigenous Studies — but you still find the odd one or two that still don't know how to deal with cultural issues, but hey, with courses like this, we can slowly make a difference.

“Non-Aboriginal people — they don't know the culture”

Will

I wanted to become an early childhood teacher mainly because... like non-Aboriginal people were doin' all the teachin', all the stuff, teachin' Aboriginal stuff, but they don't know the culture or the language and that, know what I mean? And in the Aboriginal one, they do all cultural stuff in it. All cultural background program, you know what I mean? Yeah, rather than the mainstream, just a straight-out textbook talking.

May May

I thought I'd like to be a teacher and work with young children...I wanted to be a teacher so I could share my culture with young children and be supportive of their learning.

“I will show you and others like you”

Frayne

I was 26 years old when I began my higher education at a college studying early childhood. I remember as I entered a small lecture room full of students, a young well-to-do woman was commenting and actually quoted “I wish I was an Aboriginal student because they get everything for free and all their assignments done for them”.

With that a fellow non-Indigenous student commented that: “Aboriginal students — in particular, Frayne, she’s a friend of mine (we participated in joint assignments) — and it takes her a lot longer to do assignments than anyone in this room. There are many cultural differences in learning”. With this I walked straight past this young woman, who looked only 18 years old. I caught her eyes and thought to myself, ‘I will show you and others like you that I will finish this course’.

This young woman’s attitudes and assumption could have been passed down from generations and past experiences — also because of the Indigenous students having a support unit.

This experience had made me more determined to plod along. I thought no matter how long it will take, I will finish and complete the course I have started.



We wanted to learn

“I never thought that I could do a university degree”

Robyn

I never thought that I could do a university degree — I’d never been given the opportunity. I didn’t really know anybody who’d been through university.

I never thought — I knew it was out there — but I thought it would be for people who had lots of money or had... I didn’t finish high school. So I suppose you come with that mindset, that you don’t think you’ve got the ability to do a university degree.

It wasn’t about a piece of paper, it was about how much I could learn from everything that I was given and that’s probably what put me out there a little bit because I wanted, it was my personal journey about what I could learn about that subject, and I really, I wanted every bit of information, I was very hungry for it. So that was different for me, I didn’t care about the bit of paper at the end, it didn’t really worry me whether I got it or I didn’t. I wanted to learn as much as I could.

“I felt it was my time — in educating myself”

Maureen

After my three children had grown up and left home to further their own education — my daughter became an early childhood teacher, one son became a lawyer and the other son became an architect — I felt it was my time to set my own goals in educating myself. Having worked in an early childhood Indigenous centre as an assistant for over 10 years, I felt the need to become an early childhood teacher myself.

This thought had challenged me onwards, not only to prove to myself that I could do it, but to be able to teach our own children in their early formative years (0-5 years).

This opportunity came when we were attending a conference in Brisbane back in 1998. The course of 5 years*, external studies, part-time, allowed us to work in our own centres but still be able to obtain a university degree.

*This 3 years full-time BTeach (ECS) degree now takes 4 years part-time (not 5 as previously).

“Why don’t you get a course running up, for child care?”

Sue

I have always been interested in childcare. I never finished all my school years. I had my children and my husband didn’t want me to work. I lived out in the western suburbs of Sydney, then I moved to the Central Coast.

I went back to work as a Home Care Assistant. A job came up in one of our schools as a A.E.A (Aboriginal Education Assistant). I approached the school, filled out a form and the principal said “you can start tomorrow”. That was a big thing for me. I had to work in seven schools, which was good. I began to meet all the Aboriginal children in the area.

I then opened up the first Aboriginal Homework centre on the Central Coast. Our Aboriginal community received funding from Deaths in Custody. Our community then approached our local school at Toukley to see if we could build a pre-school on their grounds — they got the permission to do this.

I then applied for the position at the preschool. After working at the centre for a year I had to attend different conferences about child care. At one of these meetings I met Ross Hughes. I approached Ross and said to him, ‘Why don’t you get a course running up for child care?’.

It took about 3 years to get the course approved and funding to be approved. Letters were sent to different organizations to let people know about the child care course.

I sent my letter of interest back. Soon it was all happening. We were starting university. My first thought was — ‘5 years! How am I going to do this and leave my family and workplace?’ Well it worked out well with my family.

“The decisions we make in our lives”

Michelle sums it up!

At the time the BTeach program was being established, I was working at an Aboriginal preschool for around 6 years as an assistant. I was growing in my role at the service but was limited in how much input I could actually have on the preschool program.

It wasn't just one incident but a number of things that was happening around that time, as well as the people who were in my life at the time, that were influences, that helped me understand the value of higher education, not only for myself but for others in my community and preschool. Everyone benefits in some way.

There were many things that helped me make the decision:

- I became aware that the role I was in was not going anywhere; I was limited in my involvement and was not fulfilled in my job because of the barriers.
- I came to the realisation that we needed Aboriginal teachers in our centres teaching our children and at that time there were not enough teachers out there.
- Having positive people around had a big influence on me. I could have quite easily made excuses as to why I couldn't do it, as I had things going on in my life at the time. But I knew it was just the fear that I had to overcome — and did — with these people around me.

I think it is important to understand that it is never really one incident or person but many that help in the decisions we make in our lives. I really don't think I'd be in the position I am in now if people didn't put their faith in me and encourage me to pursue my degree.



“I was nervous”

Danielle

I heard that Macquarie University was offering an early childhood degree for indigenous people. It came at the perfect time. I was nervous because I received poor results in my high school education. After the first information day on campus and learning we would receive support through the Indigenous unit and accommodation, I knew this was the course for me!

“I saw other Indigenous students at the uni”

May May

When I told my family that I am going back to school again they were shocked so I informed them that I'm going away for a couple of days. The break was great and I felt really good about myself, when I completed my studies and got my certificate. Oh boy! It's really amazing going through all that travelling, getting assignments in on time.

I saw other Indigenous students at the uni, and I felt, if they can do it, I can too...I didn't expect that we would become extended family at uni, with members from all over Australia.

“I met up with some good people that are really helpful”

Angie

I went through the good times, the bad times, I struggled through my studies, with the help and support of my families and some good friends. I met up with some good people that are really helpful: good lecturers, good mentors and my special thanks to Ross and Bevan and all the staff at the Indigenous support unit.

“Supporting each other”

Maureen

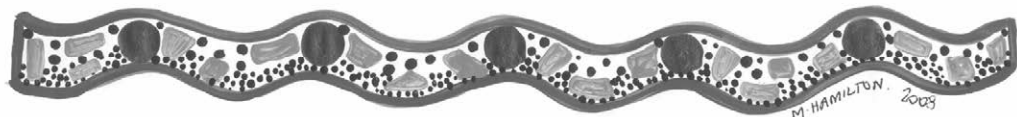
This course not only gave us the opportunity to become qualified but also to meet and form long and lasting friendships at university, with not only the other students from all over New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria but with the lecturers who had taught us, laughed with, and cried with us, over the 5 years.

We’ve had our ups and downs within the university and also at home with our families. Some of us had lost loved ones and some of us had brought new-born babies into the classrooms. We celebrated our birthdays and other special days (NAIDOC) in the calendar over the 5 years also.

Over the 5 years, I have had the company of my two very good friends from Cairns and Bamaga North Queensland — May May who had worked with me at the kindergarten in Cairns and Angie, who is May May’s Aunty, had lived and worked in Bamaga.

We had gone through the 5 years of external studies back and forth to university and had to overcome some major obstacles to complete this degree. May May had to overcome the loss of a granddaughter and Angie had to overcome the loss of her grandson.

This had not only strengthened me to see them cope with this but to give them the same strength back too, in supporting each other.



“The Aboriginal student support person was there when I needed to talk”

Bethanie

During my second year at University, studying full-time, I faced financial hardship and lack of family support like I'd never faced before. I had moved out of home and was paying high rent with only a few hours of part-time work. I wasn't earning enough money to support myself. I hadn't moved far away from my family and was still very close to the University, so travel wasn't a problem, but there were a lot of distractions. I spent a lot of time at the beach and going out with friends.

During this time I had a lot of support from my partner on the home front and at University the Aboriginal Student Support person was someone who gave me a lot of support and guidance.

Although I was enrolled as a full-time student, I was spending very little time at University. My focus was from day to day, where I was going to get the money from to pay the rent as well as buy food. Most days I would walk to and from Uni so I could save the little money I had. Some days I was feeling so down that I just didn't go to Uni and no one noticed.

After what seemed like months, but may have only been weeks, the Aboriginal Student Support person approached me to have a general chat about how things were going. This was the first time someone had actually asked me how things were and showed some interest in me. I took the opportunity to discuss my personal issues and sought advice on what I could do and look for support from other sources. After completing various forms and paperwork I was able to apply for financial assistance from Abstudy, because until this point I'd never had any government financial assistance. I was also encouraged to apply for a \$2000 scholarship. It was the Ken Brindall Memorial Scholarship, which I applied for through the Aboriginal Education Council (AEC).

With some help I completed the scholarship application form and then waited for a few weeks, before I received a notice in the mail, inviting me to attend an interview. The interview was at the AEC at Glebe where I felt very nervous but a little confident. I had been given a lot of encouragement in the days leading up to the interview from my support person at Uni, as well as my partner at home.

I was successful in gaining the scholarship, which was a huge incentive for me to keep going. The money was given in 10 instalments of \$200 payment. I used the money to supplement the income I got from part-time work.

I began to feel better about things at home and my attendance at University, because more regularly I was enjoying being there, especially knowing that there was at least one person (the Aboriginal Student Support) who knew what I was going through and was there when I needed to talk.

With the support from people who loved and cared about me, as well as from those with knowledge about scholarships, I realized that I didn't have to face the struggles I had been going through, on my own.

Without the Aboriginal Student Support person being available and their understanding of my personal issues, I really don't think that I would have reached the end of my studies.

Getting the scholarship was a turning point in my studies where I felt I had an obligation to be at University and attend all of my lectures and tutorials. The more I attended, the more I enjoyed learning and from there, I felt I had more control over my personal life and could see that I had made the correct career path.



“Show others that it can be done by them”

Maureen

On completing this degree, I went on to do a Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood so that I could have the “4th year” for Queensland Teaching Registration. This course had also enabled me in proving it can be done. And to show others that it can be done by them also.

“Coping with studies, assignments, students and hearing loss”

Leah

Coping with studies, getting assignments finished and trying to cope with modern technology and also coping with some of the students who were, to me, very outspoken, was very challenging and very intimidating.

As I struggle with my problem of hearing loss, sometimes, I felt that because I was missing a lot of conversation, I felt that I didn't really have much input into some of the class conversation. I had learnt that I shouldn't have let this hold me back because after letting other students and lecturers know, that I did feel more confident and started participating more in class.



M. HAMILTON · 2008

“It was our program, our journey”

Maxine

First and foremost, to be in a room with so many other black students, in the same field or all studying for the same degree, was very mind blowing.

When I started as a mature-aged student, in the first couple of years, as a group of students we just accepted things — we sat, we listened, we did.

As the course progressed, we, as a group of students, became more confident and began to challenge and question aspects of the course content/lessons — be it statements, thinking, research. It was nice to watch each other grow—people actually stand up at the front and speak out loud.

Lecturers began to ask us what we wanted — they expected us to begin to think for ourselves while they played devil’s advocate.

Empowering had happened subtly. This program, I feel, was successful because we were allowed to help steer it — it was our program, our journey to getting that “piece of paper”.



“Strengthening us in our own communities”

Maureen

This opportunity of having a degree through university, has opened doors for us, in strengthening us in our own communities and in helping our children to have a better quality of life than what we and our Elders had in the past. This has also proven to other Indigenous people in doing this course that they too, could have the same qualifications as their white counterparts and that they too, have the same pride and satisfaction that they could do it and achieve the same results, that others have done.

“It gives more respect, I think, in the community”

Will

The studies I have undertaken at Macquarie University have given me the opportunity to further my career in the early childhood field...*like sittin' on committees and that — like the local sobriety house committee and, like, it gives more respect I think, in the community. Know what I mean? Like bein' a role model to the kids, you know, like kids who want to go to further education. You know what I mean?*

“I see myself as a role model”

May May

When I left at the end of the course, I felt sad that I left many friends behind...I achieved a lot in my time as a student...the ability to sit and put my thoughts into words. Professionally, I could break down the big words and university language and understand what it all meant. I now have much understanding of early childhood education and I feel confident that I can work as a teacher of young children.

I didn't expect that I would be asked to organise a NAIDOC week celebration in my workplace and to open the celebration, I stood in front of the group of parents, child care staff and children. I announced the opening of NAIDOC week celebration and I acknowledged the traditional owners of the area, Yidinyji.

Well my next step is to enrol in the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education at Darwin for Linguistics and teach my own language in classrooms — Kalaw Kawa Ya (KKY) of Top Western, Torres Strait Islands and Miram Mer for Eastern Island too!

Cause I guess... like our role in our communities too is not only you know, teaching these young children, but informing community people and family of the importance of early childhood education for their little ones. I see myself as a role model for other Indigenous women of my age with families and young children...



“We can make a difference”

Robyn

The course’s practical base enabled me to gain information about real life issues impacting on families, children and the community. This opened my eyes and ears to the real issues about the inequities of social justice.

The course gave me the knowledge, tools and skills to advocate for the rights of the child in a variety of forums. It gave me the confidence and knowledge to challenge government policy directions, provide early childhood perspectives and advocate for a whole of government approach to the social justice issues of the community.

The course enabled me to channel my skills to enhance outcomes for children.

I really believe that the issues of social justice are embedded in the course structure, so that we can make a difference in our own communities and at the state and national levels of government. With many of us sharing these ideals — we can make a difference. We have learnt to work together, with and for a common goal — improving outcomes for children in the early years, improving outcomes for our families and our communities, so they can reach their optimum potential.

So the skills that I’ve brought back to my community are for advocating for children’s and families rights, and I’ve been doing that at a state level and a national level as well, so I’ve been included in a lot of, and I don’t know why, but probably cause I’m, you know, not frightened to get up and talk. The most important issue for me is that graduating from the course has given me confidence to speak out and has given validity to my voice.



“Recognition and growth”

Danielle

Looking back, it was difficult at times during those five years. However, the recognition and growth I gained as a teacher and a person, is something I will always reflect back on, with admiration and fond memories.

“I have my teaching degree now”

Sue

I kept thinking I will be a teacher soon, and maybe I will be the teacher at our centre. I have my teaching degree now. My first job I took in Sydney, working in an Aboriginal preschool which was good. I worked there for 2 ½ years until things got a bit hard at home. I applied for a job at another preschool, which I accepted, and I have now been at the centre for some time.

“I like to share with my people”

Angie

I never thought I'll be doing university studies, but I did.

I did achieve something. When I finished from my last job, just a matter of a couple of months later, I got this [job], and people sort of say, “because of the degree you have, you come straight into this other job, otherwise if you didn't have that, you'd have trouble getting another job like that”, but being qualified now, many people said, “You'd be able to get a job elsewhere, anywhere!” Yeah, I feel myself I did achieve something out of this course.

I have been mentoring some students who are doing their courses through TAFE to work in day care centres and some students studying through the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP), to be teachers. I give them support and encourage them every day. What I have achieved I like to share with my people.

I would like to encourage our young people to further their education at tertiary level.

“I still visit the trees”

Robyn

Our group monitored the growth of the gum trees outside the uni building,
in respect to the years that we were studying.

The growth, in height, of the trees mirrored our professional growth.

Each year the trees' branches continue spreading out:

We are all branching off in different directions of our life and career pathways.

But we all draw our knowledge from a central place (the trunk of the tree) –
The sharing of cultural and academic knowledge throughout the course developed
each one of us but gave the group its own identity and strength,
nurturing from within, as each one of us grew in confidence.

The roots of the tree spread out in all directions to obtain the nutrients:
peer support, tutoring, family and community support, uni sessions, research...

You will also notice that the trees are planted on a slight rise -
for me this reflects our diversity, where we come from, our geographical location,
our cultural groups, within our one cohort. Our strength is together but
each individual tree has reached its own milestone in a struggle to succeed –
to finally reach the pinnacle, to keep growing.
Collectively, as a group we look after each other and share a vision – to improve
outcomes for children in the early years.

So the trees now continue to develop their trunks and
to nurture their undergrowth for the future.

The little seeds that fall are captured by the undergrowth, then nurtured:
looking out for each other,

the next cohorts begin to unfold with new life in the BTeach journey.

They search for new knowledge, up through the trees, reaching out,
with their aspirations to be acknowledged,
so that they may reach their potentials
making a difference and creating communities of change.

I still visit the trees and I have brought my daughter and husband to see the trees.

“I’m just gunna do this”

Yarnin’ with Michael

**“It was strange like, if I had to do it over again,
I’d really love to learn in kindy, you know?”**

The original reason why I wanted to do the BTeach course to become a teacher was because I was working in a preschool as an early childhood worker. I already had my Associate Diploma in early childhood and I wanted to further my knowledge of child development, and more skills in teaching, and basically getting a degree at a university.

The things that were going on around me that helped me pick this particular course was the information that was coming out of Macquarie University and other people that already started the course. I came in with a, ah, what do you call it, advanced standing on the course because I already have my Associate Diploma, so I was getting feedback from people that were already enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching, so that you know, encouragement from people from the university, so I decided to get into it.

It took a lot of organising, ah, with, you know, ‘cause we’ve got a big family. How did I make things happen? I just made up my mind, you know, and said ‘righto, if I’m gunna do this, I’m gunna have to take the first step and do it’. So I contacted the university and got information and talked to the people down there and basically found out how I could enroll and what it takes to, you know...if there was any travel involved and where am I gunna stay and all this stuff.

I think what swayed me more to do the course was that the course was an identified degree because I feel more comfortable around Koori fellas — Koori, Aboriginal people — probably than in a mainstream course.

Yeah, the Associate Diploma I did in Armidale — that was an identified course, ah, through TAFE and doing that, and being around Aboriginal people - that would have swayed me to do this as an identified course. Cause I’ve done a course before where it wasn’t identified, and I just felt uncomfortable and, even though I’m an outgoing person and stuff, I just didn’t sort of relate like I would to a Koori person. You know what I mean?

At the beginning of my study the kind of things that were really hard for me were leaving the family for one. That was it... leaving my home town that was another one. And the travel was a big thing because I had to, I think it was about a five and a half hour drive down to uni and stuff like that, you know.

I drove most of the time. I know some people that have flown in and some people that have caught trains in and that, but, I like to drive. It was a long drive, you know. Going down there, just didn't like getting the train and stuff.

The things that were really hard to begin with my studies, was picking up the....getting into the study thing again you know. Getting into that again, after being out of the study for awhile, learning to sit in class again, taking notes, and doing the readings and all that stuff, that was hard. And assignments.

The main things that helped me complete my studies included the support of my family. You know, 'cause I said before, I've got a large family, and, there's times where, when my partner could have said, 'no, you're bloody not going down to uni, you know you're leavin' me with these kids all the time!'. So she encouraged me and other family members encouraged me to do that you know, even my employer encouraged me to do that. So that was one, the support I got from my partner and the family and employer. And the other one was support I got off me fellow students. You know? Talking about the assignments — 'how you going in the assignments?' — helping each other go through the assignments and stuff like that, so that was another one that got me through.

Also my determination to finish the bloody thing helped me to complete my studies. You know, I said 'I'm just gunna do this', yeah, and that was it. I was determined to do it. So that was another thing.

Even that on-campus tutoring, you know in the evenings. That was a big thing too; it helped us get through.

I like personally meeting a lot of people, because I love to meet a lot of people, making lots of new friends and stuff like that, ah, big noting myself.

This was one of the highlights of my time in the BTeach ...yeah, meeting a lot of people, being, yeah, making friends, contacts, enjoying people's company. Because, you know, different, they're different. There's lots of different people, even though we're all Koori people you know, like you come from Queensland, and there's Torres Strait Island people are different again. Queensland people are different. Then we had people from out west you know, from New South Wales and even though we were all Kooris, we'd come together and we'd share our different experiences.

Another highlight of my time in the BTeach was getting through my assignments, and passing my assignments and saying, “oh yeah got through this one, you got through that one”, you know, and... completing the units and, um whatever. Just finishing off that, that was a good feeling.

I can't think of anything that interfered with my progress towards getting my degree. There were no major problemsNo. I just can't think of any major problems where I said “nah, I'm not gunna do this, I'm gunna throw it in”, nothing. My family have been very encouraging of me to finish the degree.

I didn't really have any visions at the time of what they [the uni] would want me to do or of what they thought a BTeach student should do. You know, cause I'd done courses before but it didn't really click that — It didn't really click to say “I'm a teacher, I'm an actual teacher” — because I had a terrible, terrible education when I was a kid, from kindy right through until high school. Cause I left, I left high school in year, what do they call it this time, Year 8, Year 8, I think that was second form. So I had a really terrible time, and I repeated three times in Year 6.

Yeah I repeated three times in Year 6, so I had a terrible time in high school, every year, primary and high school. Um, I don't know. Then after that, you know, I was an alcoholic and stuff after I left school and stuff and a drug addict and whatever. Then I gave it up. Then I got a basic adult education, then I, that's where I got into computers, and that's where I got into the Associate Diploma and that's where I went straight onto [the course].

It was strange like, if I had to do it over again, I'd really love to learn in kindy, you know? And do all my education there, instead of waiting 'til I'm thirty-eight or thirty nine, or something like that, before I start doing it. Should be other way 'round. But then again I think, you know, the trouble that I had going through that, are they going through the same thing again? You know?

And I know back then when I was going to school I didn't have any support from my father, cause my mum died when I was baby see. And I didn't have any support in education, you know. And I've been around in early childhood for so many years that.... But it's slowly starting to get better. And that's where that support can come in, for them to start earlier at home, you know, to learn how to read and write at home plus going into school and getting that same support and coming home when the kids come home you know what, and talk about their day at the school. “Ah, what did you do today?”, you know, and “show me what you've done”, and show them how, if they haven't done it right, show em how to do it.



Thinking about getting a qualification?

Questions and Answers

Who is going to teach me?

Teaching staff will include Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who are interested in supporting you in your studies. Most will be familiar with working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and all will be very knowledgeable about the subjects they are teaching.

How are they going to support me?

Most TAFE colleges and universities will have an Indigenous support unit where you can find safe space and helpful, friendly people. Many of these units have websites where you can begin to become familiar with the support services that are available. Most places will be able to provide advice on financial support and information on accommodation and travel from home to your place of study, as well as help with study skills. They will also help you get used to the ways that TAFE colleges and universities are organised, getting to know the buildings as well as timetables and paperwork for enrolment.

What are they going to teach me?

Your classes will relate to what you have decided to do. If you are going to be an early childhood teacher, you will have a wide range of subjects, including things like Child development, Families and social systems in Australia, Managing children's services, Language and literacy, Maths and science for young children, and so on. You will also have practice teaching in a preschool or child care centre to develop your skills in planning for and teaching young children from many backgrounds

How will they teach?

Different subjects will be taught in different ways. You will have help to get used to the expectations of the TAFE or university where you will be studying. For example, you will be expected to become familiar with and use the library and computer systems, to read academic English and study for quizzes and some exams. You will take notes on lectures given by teaching staff and learn to write essays and reports. Sometimes you will be expected to work by yourself or with a tutor, and sometimes you will work in small groups with other students to explore the material you are studying.

What will I come away with?

You will need to talk with different people to get information on what course is best for you. You might start by talking with someone you know who has been in a good course. You might also ring up people at the Indigenous unit where you want to study to get some information about the courses they offer. Depending on how long you study, you could do just a few subjects, or you might earn an Associate Diploma or Diploma from TAFE or a Degree such as a Bachelor of Teaching from a university. You might then wish to do further study or develop skills in research.

How can we find further information?

A good place to start is the web site www.year12whatnext.gov.au for information and ideas about education, training and employment. Whether you have finished year 12 or not, if you are interested in university the website of the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations www.dest.gov.au has a list of Indigenous Higher Education Centres across the country. You can find it if you click on “Indigenous Education” in the left box then look for it in the “Quick Find” box on the right. You could also look for information about TAFE. You can Google “TAFE” for the website in your state/territory and find Indigenous support contacts by clicking on “Students” or “Student support”.





The use of the terms ‘Indigenous’, ‘Indigenous Australians’, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ will always be controversial. Each term may be appropriate in a given context. The use of any individual term is not intended to be divisive or to ignore the diversity of the peoples who lived in Australia prior to European arrival and whose descendants continue to live on these lands.

We have made every effort to accurately represent the material available to us. Any errors are unintentional, but ours.





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