

## My Biography as a Picture Book.

Through written and pictorial representation, this autobiography will explain how the journey of my life has helped me to become the teacher I am today. Sergio the penguin is a character who endures the perils of many children in today's world and overcomes them through sheer determination and drive. The true lessons I have learned from my life so far is to not give up, to persevere and to always follow your dreams, no matter how obscure they may seem.

As a child, I lived with my grandfather because my mother was a single mother. My mother ran a market stall and found it very hard as a young woman to manage motherhood and a small business. My grandfather was a carpenter and one day he decided to make me several building blocks in a variety of colours. He painted them with toxic paint, I put them in my mouth and they poisoned me. He was trying his best in a role that he knew nothing about, but on those long summer days he would tell me great stories, most of which were probably false but they taught me many important life lessons. Later, I would become a great story-teller and I believe this was something I gained during the early years of my childhood, the time Maria Montessori (1966, p. 38) would refer to as *the sensitive period*.

*"A sensitive period refers to a special sensibility which a creature acquires in its infantile state, while it is still in a process of evolution. It is a transient disposition and limited to the acquisition of a particular trait. Once this trait, or characteristic, has been acquired, the special sensibility disappears."*

The stories taught me to never stop believing but more importantly they taught me to never stop trying. I ended up spending several days in the local hospital due to the poisonous nature of the paint on these building blocks and these were my first ever memories that would craft the way for the future.



I remember my mother being very angry at my grandfather but it wasn't his fault, he was merely doing his job as a surrogate father while my mother was busy running her market stall. I learned later that it was basically impossible to bring up a family on your own after my father had left, but we struggled through the early years together and soon it was time for me to go to school.

I'll never forget my first day. Nerves, excitement and pink custard. At school, I only had one friend. His name was Scott Ferguson and he wore a leather jacket. Everybody used to think he was so cool and I really wanted to be like him. He based his look on 'The Fonz' from the popular TV show 'Happy Days'. I still hold the distinct memory of another boy touching his jacket and Scott saying in a cool American accent, "Hey, don't touch the leather." I thought it was very cool.

In her usual erratic fashion, my mother soon decided to move house and so it was time to leave my school and my best friend. What a shame it was. I had to leave him behind along with his cool attitude and his famous leather jacket. We moved to a different part of town that my mother thought would be more beneficial in terms of education.

When I arrived at my new school, it wasn't all roses and laughter.



I plodded through middle school with limited interest and a friendship group that could be counted on a single finger. Soon it was time for high school, which turned out to be the worst years of my life to date. My mother had done the right thing by moving to a small village where the demographics were more in favour of wealth and education rather than street crime and drugs. But along with the wealth and the class came the feeling of isolation and inferiority. I wasn't rich, I had a disjointed family and I was still wearing the trousers that my mother had bought me three years ago. Children would take it upon themselves to get me in a headlock, pull my hair, steal my lunch, steal my money and make fun of me. I seemed to be able to handle this and in a way it made me understand what it feels like to be picked on, when I see it today.

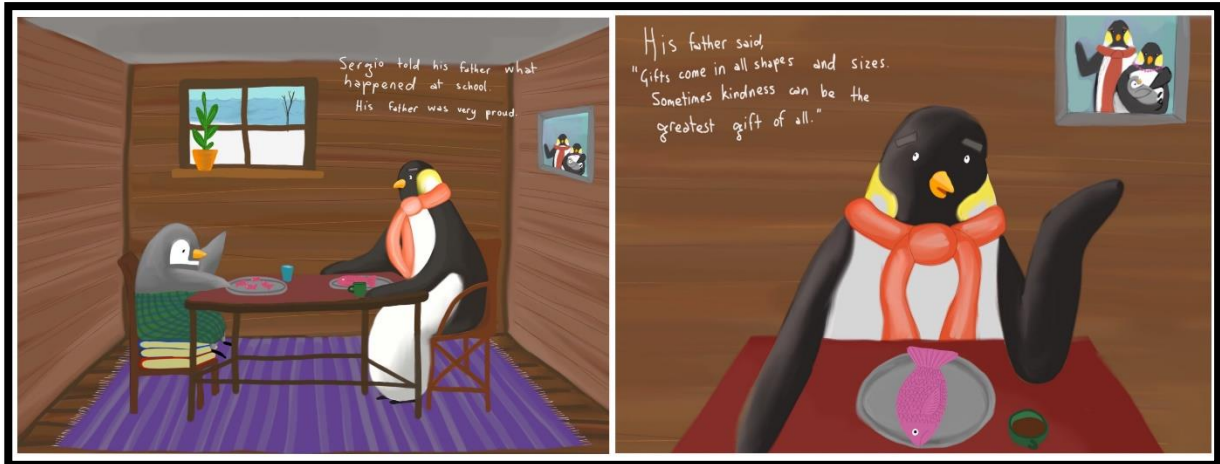
I found strength in helping other children who were being bullied and this is how I made my *real* friends. We all had something in common. We were victims of bullies and for some reason it made us stronger. We would look out for each other and the fact that we had each other's support made it easier to cope with continuous torment of name calling and physical violence.



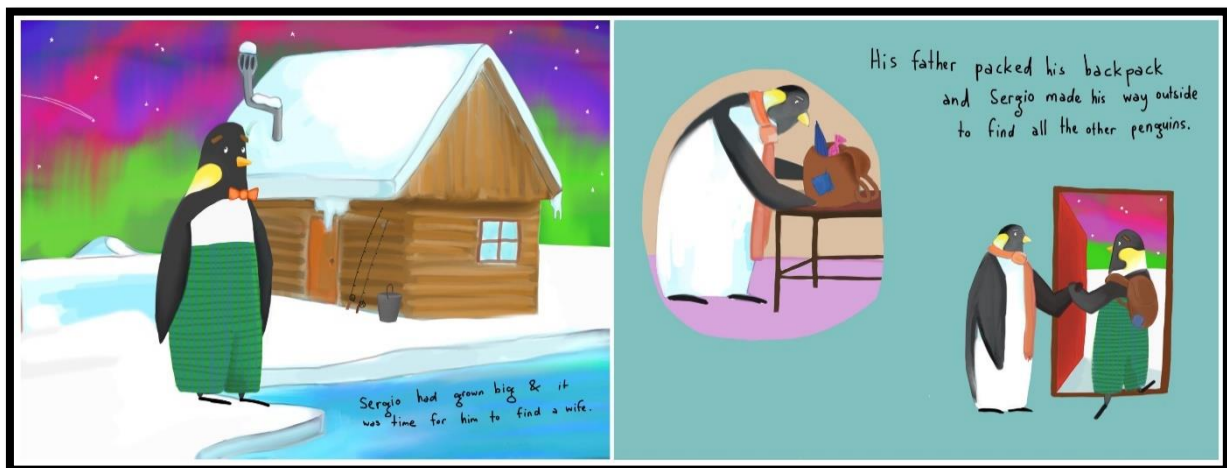
Everyone tells you to tell a teacher but when you're in the thick of it, you feel trapped and helpless. We started volunteering in the local youth club during the evenings and this was a huge stepping stone to where I am today. I saw that working with children was a pure delight. Time would fly and the nights, instead of being filled with loneliness and the dread of the following day, were filled with laughter and the cacophony of children's voices. The years of secondary school passed quickly and it was soon time to start thinking about the future.



I had to decide what I was going to do with my life. Was I going to go to university or was I going to leave school altogether and start earning some money like my mother had done? One evening I sat with my mother in the living room and talked about the future. My mother suggested that because I loved working with children, I should be a primary school teacher. I respected her and I followed her advice. It turned out to be the greatest advice I was ever going to receive. I filled in the documents and decided it was time to go to university.



Teaching seemed to be the best profession for me. I really wanted to make a difference. I moved to Sheffield and started to study to be a teacher. I enjoyed it from the first day. I loved the fact that you were able to work in teams and plan together to solve difficult scenarios with regards to the individual child and the whole entity of the school. I was given a kindergarten class. The children were four years old and the energy from the class seemed to inspire me. They loved to hear stories and would often request that I tell them a story at the end of each day. When I suggested that we read a book together they would insist that I told them a story from my head.



Maria Montessori believed that the power of storytelling was a very powerful tool within the classroom and linked many of her teaching pedagogies to the telling of certain stories, such as the story of Communication in Signs or the Coming of the Universe and the Earth. It was this realisation that the power of story-telling was so important that led me to read more about the studies of Maria Montessori. If I was going to try and integrate some of her methodology into my classroom, I would need to plan and research accordingly and

my university tutor was a great help. He helped me plan for this difficult journey with some great reading material and sources of information.

Three years passed quickly and as they did my skills for story-telling and teaching improved to no end. The days flew by. I taught in several schools, experienced a variety of demographics and many children from different socio-economic backgrounds. I made resources that were hands on, produced endless interactive displays and took part in practical examinations. The end result was that I graduated as an accredited primary school teacher with qualified teacher status.

My first job was within a local primary school in my home town of Sheffield. I was given a kindergarten class. They were the most adorable children you could ever meet but the staff at this school were very intimidating and not as welcoming as the teachers I had met at other primary schools. They seemed to look down upon new teachers and comments directed towards me about my limited experience made me feel isolated and ultimately extinguished my enthusiasm for teaching. I felt alone once again and it was a stark reminder that the world of work and full time employment can be just as cruel as the playground.

I decided to reach out to the world and push my boundaries. I completed my contract and made for the shores of Europe. I wanted to learn a new language and I wanted to understand how children learned to communicate from an early age, so I took a job as an au pair in rural France. I would look after two children under one year of age. I couldn't speak French and neither could they, so my plan was to learn French together and it was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. It rejuvenated my inspiration to teach and brought back my faith in the power of early year's education on a global level. Maria Montessori integrated a global aspect of learning into her methodology, linking the world and nature into every classroom, and this was something that I would later incorporate into my methodology and would ultimately bring me to a Montessori school.

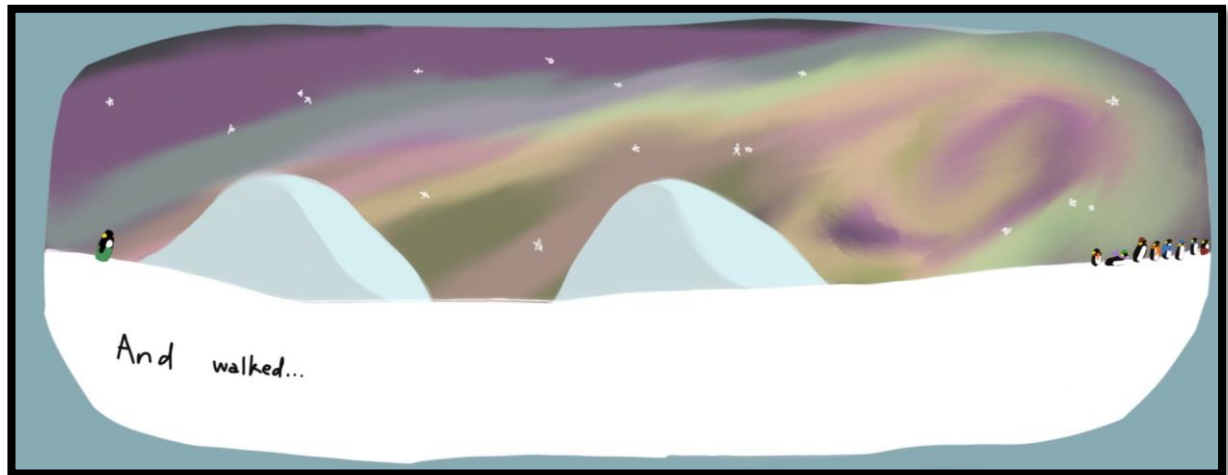


After my time in France, I felt it was time to get back out there into the teaching world, but like Maria Montessori, I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to give those children who may not get a chance to strive, the opportunity to reach their full potential. I had been reading a lot about the Chinese education system so decided that it was time to head to China to see for myself.

Much to the dismay of my mother, I travelled to Italy where I caught the longest train ride of my

life. For two weeks I sat aboard the Trans-Siberian Express. The cities passed in the night as the wheels roared along the steel track and the mountains in the distance carved the way for the future. It was an interesting journey, one I'll never forget, but eventually I arrived in Beijing. The place where I believed I could make a difference. I understood from the books I'd read that if I worked with children who had limited

exposure to resources or positive experiences in their life, I could really feel the worth of my teaching. My aim was to find a job in a rural school where I could change the path of the lives that may not have the opportunity to spread their wings and fly. After one month in China, I struggled to find what I was looking for and I decided to move to Australia where I'd heard so many good things. According to my research, it was a well developed country but still had its cultural diversity and this attracted me to the crystal shores of this great nation I now call home.



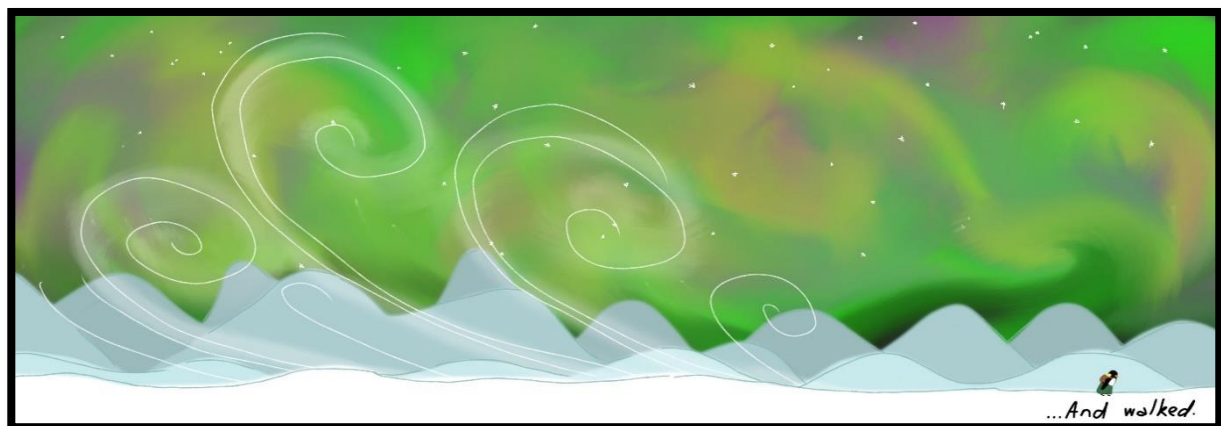
It started to seem like I was chasing a dream that didn't exist. I wanted to live and work in a community where I could introduce independent learning, where the child has a say in the path of their educational journey, but I also wanted to feel like I was doing my part to change the shape of today's world. As soon as I landed in Australia, I started looking for a job. At my first interview I realised I'd found what I was looking for. It took place in an Islamic school in Western Sydney, it was on the outskirts of one of the most popular cities in the world but still had the dynamics I was looking for. The children were often the victims of racial tension and abuse, many of the children were refugees from Bangladesh or Lebanon, and English was the second language for the majority of the pupils and parents. I decided that it would be this school where I would focus my energy and make the difference that I so wanted. *Montessori, M (1988, p 98)* discussed the value of a teacher gaining spirit rather than mechanism and this was something that I felt this job would give me, a sense of spirit.

*"The subject of our study is humanity; our purpose is to become teachers. Now what really makes a teacher is love for the human child; for it is love that transforms the social duty of the educator into the higher consciousness of a mission."*

From my upbringing in Sheffield I had knowledge of the Koran and knowledge of the Islamic faith, which was the angle that got me the job. I could speak Arabic and my understanding of the faith astounded the interviewing panel. Soon I was set to work on my year three class, but it was apparent that the children and even some of the teachers believed that they were set to fail. I made slow but steady progress in changing the philosophy of the teachers and the children, and lifting their confidence.



It was hard at first. Some teachers were stuck in the mud. They had limited access to training and new pedagogies and I felt that the introduction to project based learning and more independent tasks as opposed to teacher-led activities was too much for the staff to handle. At times it seemed like I was banging my head against a brick wall. I continued to chip away, I helped compile staff development days, I welcomed teachers into my classroom to model lessons, and slowly but surely I started to see a change in the attitude of the teachers and therefore a change in the



attitude of the children.

I was soon curriculum co-ordinator and the mentor for most of the new graduates. During the ten years I worked there I truly feel that every child that came through my class and every teacher that passed their accreditation left with hundred percent more confidence than when they came in. They left with the feeling that they could achieve anything, and with the skills to understand that the child not the teacher should be the main focus of the classroom. I taught and modelled in a way that enabled the teacher to introduce a subject but rather than deliver a series of facts that the children then have to revise and recite to pass an assessment, I wanted them to be able to inspire the children to seek knowledge and know how to find it, and once they had found it, how to use it and represent it. This methodology was very reminiscent of the

teachings of Montessori, and it was these methods that helped to inspire my teaching and guide me in a way that enabled the children to have power as they learned within a carefully prepared environment.

*"...realizing the peculiarly absorbent nature of the child's mind, she has prepared for him a special environment; and, then, placing the child within it, has given him the freedom to live in it, absorbing what he finds there."*

*E.M. Standing: Her Life and Work (1998, p 265)*

I felt like I was finally starting to make a difference and one day, something happened that made it a reality for me. A true measure of my hard work and devotion was laid out for all to see and it brought a tear to my eye.

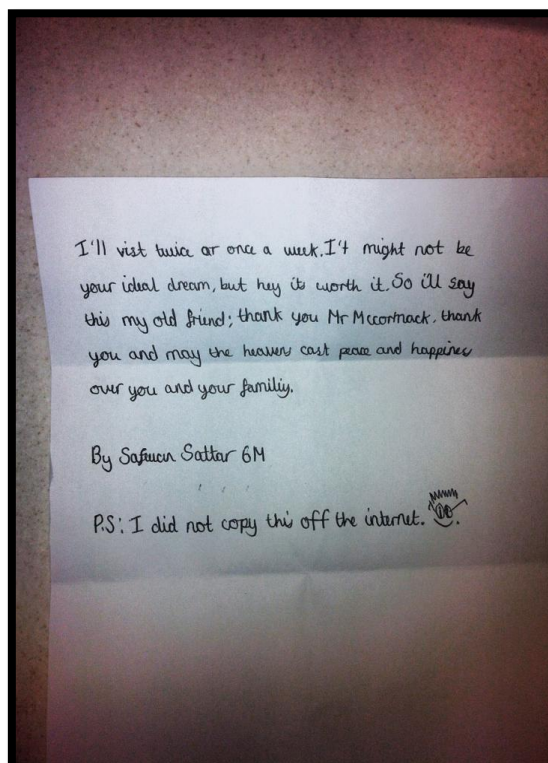
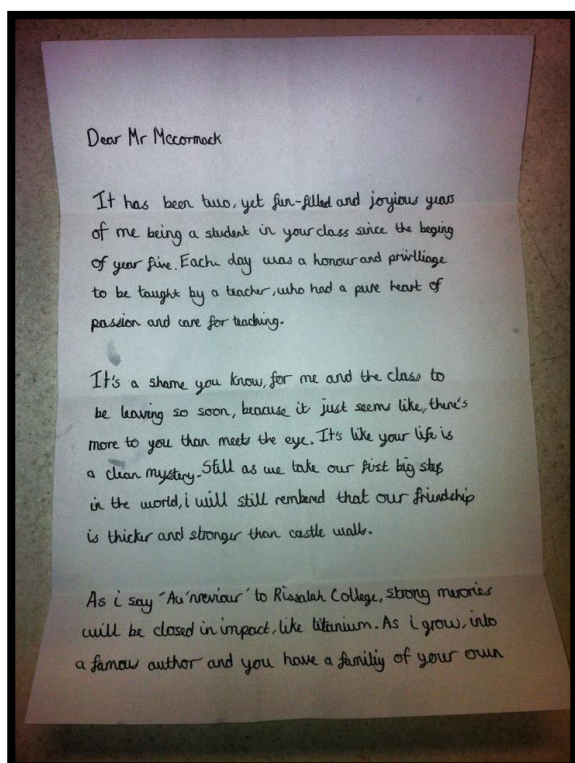
It was my tenth year at the school and I was teaching year six. A young man whom I'd seen progress through school arrived in my class. His name was Safwan. He was a meek young man, buck teeth and wonky glasses. He would always sit alone on the playground. He looked content but he lacked the confidence to achieve. I could see something in him that, if harnessed correctly, could be so rewarding. I decided I was going to make him the most confident powerful young man that I possibly could. I showered him with praise and compliments. I focused my attention on him and I made sure the children in the class started to respect him. I would point out the great things he had done for all to see. I could see the children starting to respect him more. His smile grew wider each and every day. I couldn't let him leave my class without the confidence to feel like he could do anything he wanted. Montessori (1982, p.110) expressed the need to remove or limit both mental and physical obstacles within a child's way;

*"Obstacles must be reduced to a minimum and the surroundings should provide the necessary means for the exercise of those activities which develop a child's energies."*

The year soon passed and I had forgotten my initial job of creating a confident young man out of Safwan because by now he had a nice network of friends and his social skills were so much more advanced. The final day of school had arrived. It was the awards day. Each teacher had to approach the stage and state their most improved child and their highest achiever. The hall was packed. There were five hundred children, five hundred and fifty parents and sixty members of staff.

I approached the stage, grabbed the microphone and announced my two selected children. Safwan was obviously my most improved. The measure of his improvement wasn't his grades or his assessment marks, but his social and personal skills and this is something I talked about in my speech. Then suddenly, as if in a movie, Safwan stood up in the centre of the hall. He stood there for at least thirty seconds whilst the entire hall fell silent. He slowly walked up to the stage, removed the microphone from my hand and asked politely if he could read out a letter (see below).





The letter brought a tear many people's eyes that day, especially mine. He spoke about the fact that because somebody had faith and believed in him, he felt he could achieve anything he wanted, and that's all it takes. With a small bit of faith and confidence you can succeed, and this is what I had given to him.

Sat in the audience that day was Dr William McKeith. He had seen me teach and he understood that I wanted to design a classroom where the focus was the child rather than the teacher. Shortly after the final day of school, I received a call from William offering me a job in a Montessori School in Balmain. I spent one day in the classroom and as soon as I saw the children engaged in activities driven by interest and not reward or the threat of missing recess, I knew that this was the place for me and I happily took the job.

The skills and experiences I gathered on the road to where I am today has enabled me to be the teacher I am now, and that is what I want to instil in the children that I currently teach and all the children that I may teach in the future.

The journey is yours, follow your dreams and eventually you will succeed.

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