

# Mornington Island: remote but not off the education map

Bill Minnis



School Principal Mona Anau and students

Heading a K10 school in an Indigenous island community in the Gulf of Carpentaria has its challenges, but for Mona Anau, it's the ideal teaching job. She left Tara Shire State College in Tara, near Toowoomba, where she had been deputy principal, to take up the principal's position at Mornington Island State School in July 2008. And after two years on the job, she's looking forward to another two years.

"I love being here," she told *Education Today*. "The children are wonderful, the parents are lovely and my teachers are young and innovative."

Mornington Island (Gunana) (Lat. 16.563, Long. 139.432, pop. 1,130) is the largest of the Wellesley Islands. The traditional owner clans are Lardil, Yungkal and Kaiadilt.

Travelling to Mornington Island is an

adventure in itself; pack your bags, mind the 20 kg luggage and zero carriage alcohol restrictions and fly west from Cairns. The flight takes an hour and a half before landing in Normanton on the Norman River at the base of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and then there's another 40-minute flight to Mornington Island.

Born in Tonga and raised in Far North Queensland, Anau says that she was ready for a promotion and looking for the challenge of running a remote school when she was offered the Mornington Island position.

"I had many Indigenous schoolmates, so I knew what to expect before we arrived on the island. The media portrayal of life in a remote community is often quite unrepresentative of the facts," she said.

"As a dry community, Mornington Island is a

safe and welcoming place to live and work."

Around 230 children from Kindergarten to Year 10 are enrolled at the school. There are 17 teachers, assisted by 14 Indigenous teachers' aides. Mona Anau is supported by the deputy principal, head of department and administration and maintenance staff.

In common with other remote schools, staff turnover has been a problem, though less now than when she arrived. Eighty per cent of the teachers were new when she took over and nine will leave at the end of this year.

"The islander children are very loving and they get attached to their teachers, so it can be unsettling when they have to say goodbye."

School attendance can always be better, but is acceptable, Anau says. Children in class ranges from 65% to 75% on any given day and in some it





tops 80%. But there's a drop on Friday afternoons after *Community Development Employment Projects* (CDEP) work finishes for the week and families head off to the bush. Family "comings and goings" to other islands and to Doomadgee on the mainland can also interrupt attendance.

Although most children speak a traditional language at home, the island's common language is English and all classes at the school are conducted in English, with teachers' aides on hand to help out. Traditional language and dance classes on Wednesday and Thursday are highlights of the school week.

As Year 10 approaches, families are confronted with the decision of whether their children should finish their education, or leave the island to attend boarding school. Around half opt for boarding school in Townsville, Brisbane, Mt Isa or Charters Towers, enrolling in schools where there are other students from Mornington Island. Most complete Year 12 and an encouraging number go on to university.

Jamie Skinner is one of Anau's 'young and innovative' teachers. She, and her partner Tom Watson, joined the staff at the start of this year. They were appointed through Education Queensland's *Partners for Success Strategy* to recruit and select teachers for 39 identified Indigenous schools. The programme is experiencing a growth in applications and interest from teachers wanting to take up employment in these rich and diverse environments.

Both are first time teachers, having graduated from QUT last year. Skinner teaches Prep to Year 10 classes in Physical Education, Music, Home



Clockwise: Mona Anau and students meet island elders; Jamie Skinner; Tom Watson; Sally Evelyn

Economics and Art. Watson teaches Physical Education, Marine Studies, Science and Music.

"Mornington Island was our first preference," Skinner told *Education Today*. "You don't often get an opportunity to work in such a remote location."

Like all first year teachers, there are "good days and bad days" in class. But the good days far outweigh the less good experiences, she says.

Interaction between teachers and children is both close and a lot more physical than it would be in a suburban Australian school. "The children are fantastic, very loving and very inquisitive. Coming from Brisbane 'touchy-feely' was something to get used to. Someone is always playing with my long blonde hair."

Out of school, Skinner and Watson find plenty to do. There's the island to explore on bikes, fishing trips in their Tinny and get-togethers with other teachers and friends. There's even some family to visit – her uncle and aunt David and Brenda Withers have

owned and operated the Birri Fishing Resort on the island for 25 years.

As they approach the end of their first year on the island, both are committed to staying for at least another two years. "We love it."

Sally Evelyn, another of Mona Anau's valued young teachers, is heading into her third year of teaching at Mornington Island. Currently teaching Year 5, she is completing her Masters in Guidance Counselling.

With her principal's support, Evelyn is working with the *Partners for Success* team to assist in the recruitment of teachers to Mornington Island.

"It is so important that we have enthusiastic teachers that really want to be here and that are active in forming relationships with the community. It has made my work as a teacher much richer for the relationships," she says.

**Mornington Island State School**  
[www.mornislass.eq.edu.au](http://www.mornislass.eq.edu.au)

*Partners for Success process at [www.issu.com.au](http://www.issu.com.au)*