The introduction of Montessori teaching and learning practices in an early childhood classroom in a remote Indigenous school

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CHAPTER ONE
RESEARCH DEFINED

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Current teaching and learning practices in Aboriginal education are disadvantaging Aboriginal students compared with non-Aboriginal students (Department Premier & Cabinet [DPMC], 2016). Current data confirm that education targets set by DPMC have “expired unmet” (DPMC, 2016, p. 12) or have experienced “little change” (DPMC, 2016, p. 6). Despite copiousness amounts of human and financial resources, Aboriginal education providers are by-and-large failing to generate constructive change (Breadmore, 1986; DPMC, 2016; Ford, 2010; Osborne, 2013). A review of research on Aboriginal education suggests that no substantive advances have been made in Aboriginal education since 1948 (Australian Council of Education Research, 1948; DPMC, 2016; Hughes & Hughes, 2009; Malin & Maidment, 2003). Aboriginal students have been described as “fringe dwellers in the real estate of the classroom” (Price, 2012, p. 73). In particular, there are significant concerns in regard to Aboriginal education in remote Australia. Education programs in remote Australia may be culturally irrelevant. The disadvantage to Aboriginal students caused by current teaching and learning practices adopted in remote communities has prompted this study into the effectiveness of an alternative method of education, that of Montessori pedagogy.

In 2003, schooling among Aboriginal Australians was in a state of “widespread dissatisfaction” (Malin & Maidment, p. 90). In 2009, Aboriginal Education policy documents released by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEEDYA) stated that declarations had gone from commitments to generalities (Hughes & Hughes, 2009). Specific targets moved from “fix the problem in four years” in 1997 to “fix half the problem in ten years” in 2008 (Hughes & Hughes, 2009, p. 2).

Although recent evidence suggests that some advance has been made in “halving the gap” for Aboriginal students, it is concerning that little change in key areas has been recorded (Joe, 2011). “Halving the gap” or “closing the gap” refers to the distance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in life expectancy, infant
mortality, access to Early Childhood education in remote communities, school attendance, reading, writing, numeracy, Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates, and employment (DPMC, 2015, p. 5). In 2014, the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott stated, “There’s been very little improvement towards ‘halving the gap’ in reading, writing and numeracy” (DPMC, 2014, p. 1). He went on to further state, “Most closing the gap statements are not on track to be met” (DMPC, 2015, p. 3).

The Council of Australian Governments [COAG] (2009) defined the statement “closing the gap” or “halving the gap” as a “great national challenge, but also a great national opportunity to achieve lasting change and ensure that future generations of Indigenous Australians have all the opportunities enjoyed by other Australians to live full, healthy lives and achieve their potential” (p. 33). However, Price (2012) noted that educational professionals who are crafting current Aboriginal educational methods are “ill-informed about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which creates a vulnerability of vast dimensions” (p. 74). Specifically, regarding very remote Australia, Osborne (2013) stated:

Western philosophies that underpin mainstream Australian society and the broader education system are at odds with the axiologies, epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, particularly in the red dirt contexts of very remote communities (p. 5).

Given the present state of affairs, alternative approaches to Aboriginal education in remote Early Childhood programs must be considered. Such alternative approaches need to be well documented and grounded in evidence-based research.

Montessori pedagogy is an alternative method of education to current practices in many schools. This alternative method is an internationally recognised educational system that “aims to provide children and young people, from birth to maturity, with learning environments designed to support the development of social, intellectual, and ethical independence” (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011, p. 3). Montessori pedagogy is collated from over one hundred years of experience in diverse cultural settings (Feez, 2010) and provides a culturally sensitive pedagogy (Brown & Steele, 2015). A key foundation of Montessori teaching and learning practice is that children are able to freely choose their own learning (Cossentino, 2005; Cossentino, 2010; Montessori, 1966; Johnson, 2016). Montessori pedagogy is based on the premise that
student-selected learning approaches provide students with the opportunity to be independent, autonomous and self-disciplined (Cossentino, 2010; Danner & Fowler, 2015; Johnson, 2016). The teaching practice is “characterised by multi-age classrooms, a special set of educational materials, student-chosen work in time blocks, a collaborative environment with student mentors and individual and small group instruction in academic and social skills” (Lillard, 2005, p. 1).

The Montessori National Curriculum is the key curriculum document in Montessori pedagogy in Australia. In 2011, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) approved the Montessori National Curriculum as an alternative method of education. Montessori teachers are required to understand both child developmental theory and the sequence of planned lessons that construct the Montessori curriculum (Cossentino, 2007). Montessori pedagogy has the potential to provide a more culturally appropriate method of education in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. From the teacher-researcher’s experience, Aboriginal child rearing techniques align with Montessori methodology more than traditional teaching methodologies. A more culturally appropriate method of education has the potential to provide a more realistic opportunity to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Breadmore, 1986).

1.2 PERSONAL STATEMENT

The motivation for this research stems from the researcher’s personal interest and involvement in remote Aboriginal education. The researcher first became interested in remote Aboriginal education when she worked in Kiwirrkurra Remote Community (RC), Western Australia between 2010 and 2012. Kiwirrkurra RC is the second most remote community in the world and is strongly traditional in Aboriginal culture. During her time in Kiwirrkurra RC, the researcher came to the belief that the system mandated method of education being used was not culturally appropriate. Through conversations with colleagues and by researching alternative methods of education, the researcher realised that Montessori pedagogy might provide a more culturally appropriate method of education in a remote context. This study was undertaken to provide evidence-based research in Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program.
1.3 AIM OF THE RESEARCH

This study aims to describe the effect of Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. Underpinning the study is the belief that Aboriginal children must be provided with every opportunity to reach, or exceed, minimum standards in literacy and numeracy. The Closing the Gap Report 2016 stated that the majority of Indigenous children in remote locations are not reaching minimum standards (DPMC, 2016). This research seeks to investigate an alternative educational approach, Montessori pedagogy, in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood context.

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to observe and describe the effect of Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program to ascertain whether this alternative approach to education provides a more culturally appropriate practice than past methods. The Aboriginal Education Plan for Western Australian Public Schools 2011-2014 highlights, “We must develop new approaches to address the diverse needs of Aboriginal students in urban, regional and remote areas” (Department of Education Western Australia, 2011, p. 2). The then Western Australian Minister for Education, Dr. Elizabeth Constable MLA, emphasised the need to “develop strategies to close the gap between the achievements of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students” (Department of Education Western Australia, 2012, p. 3). One possible strategy to “close the gap” could be Montessori pedagogy.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The general research question for the study is: What is the effect of Montessori pedagogy on Aboriginal students in a remote Early Childhood program?

The four specific research questions to be addressed are:

1. In what ways do Aboriginal students respond to Montessori pedagogy within a remote Early Childhood program?
2. In what ways has Montessori pedagogy impacted on student behaviour within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program?
3. In what ways has Montessori pedagogy impacted on language learning and development within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program?
4. In what ways has Montessori pedagogy engaged community members to interact within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program?
1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was conducted through the use of an individual case study (Berg, 2007). The individual case study method aims to collect information about a specific person, group or environment to meritoriously recognise how the subject functions (Berg, 2007). The individual case study chosen was the Early Childhood program in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network, Papulankutja Campus. Four methods of data collection were used in this study:

a) Video recording and observational framework by the teacher-researcher
b) Journal writing by the teacher-researcher
c) Review of the ten observation frameworks by the critical friend
d) Review of the three one-on-one interviews with the informant.

During the data collection period the researcher video recorded the Montessori pedagogy program three times a week for one to two hours at randomly selected times. Video recording aimed to provide hard evidence of the observations. The teacher-researcher used a journal to record observations of key events that occurred serendipitously and to dispassionately describe day-to-day occurrences in the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program.

A critical friend was engaged to observe the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood class. The critical friend recorded two forms of data: general observational framework (Appendix B) and an individual observational framework (Appendix C). Observations occurred twice every three weeks during the data collection period. In total, the critical friend completed five general observation frameworks and five individual observation frameworks. The critical friend had over 30 years’ teaching experience, at least 8 years of which working with Aboriginal students, but no previous affiliation or experience with Montessori pedagogy.

An impact that related to the design of the study was the interpretation and translation of student speech and behaviour. All students in the population are of Aboriginal descent and use English as an additional third or fourth language. A bilingual Ngaanyatjarra person was engaged as the informant to assist with interpretation and translation. With the permission of the student’s parents/caregivers, the informant observed the classroom and responded to inquiries from the teacher-
researcher. The informant provided clarity when responses took an unexpected turn. The informant attended the classroom for two hours, three times over the course of the data collection period, as well as three video-recorded one-on-one interviews with the teacher-researcher, and provided insight into student and community life and the effects of Montessori pedagogy on the Early Childhood student cohort.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the study lies in the need to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The study endeavours to describe the effect of Montessori pedagogy through the response of those most closely associated with Aboriginal education: students, parents and caregivers, community members and education professionals. Before commencing the study, the teacher-researcher consulted the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network Leadership Team in order to obtain permission to conduct the study within a Department of Education Western Australia school; subsequently, the Papulankutja Campus Early Childhood program trialled Montessori pedagogy.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were three limitations to the study. The first limitation was that of potential personal bias as the teacher-researcher is Montessori trained. Three methods were used to address the issue of personal bias. These were: the use of the verbatim principle, bracketing and triangulation. These methods are detailed in Chapter Four: Design of the Research.

The second limitation was the sample size of 17 students. This small sample size potentially limits the generalisability of the study to a wider Australian population. However, it does not hinder the value of the research for education audiences such as the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network and other remote Aboriginal contexts. The sample size was representative of the majority of the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program population in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network. Furthermore, a pilot of the study was conducted in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network, Kiwirrkurra Campus Early Childhood program in 2011 and 2012. The Kiwirrkurra Campus pilot provided a basis for the research.
The third limitation was that Montessori pedagogy was singularly considered as an alternative method of education. The teacher-researcher acknowledges that Aboriginal education is a complex issue. Aboriginal education cannot be resolved by the provision of a singular alternative teaching methodology. This research provides a description of what worked in the classroom.

1.9 DEFINITIONS

The following terms are defined according to their usage in the present research study.

1.9.1 Aboriginal person

An Aboriginal person is “someone who is of Aboriginal descent, and identifies as being Aboriginal and is accepted as such by an Aboriginal community” (Harrison, 2012, p. 193).

1.9.2 Critical friend

The critical friend in the research was an educator with over thirty years’ experience in both remote and mainstream education. The critical friend was not trained by, or had any affiliation with, Montessori pedagogy.

1.9.3 Closing the gap

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) “committed all Australian governments collectively to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage” (2009, p. 33). This study focuses on closing the gap in education.

1.9.4 Indigenous Australian

The term Indigenous Australian refers to “both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people” (Harrison, 2012, p. 193).

1.9.5 Early Childhood education

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has defined Early Childhood education as “long day care, occasional care, family day care, multi-purpose Aboriginal children’s services, preschools and
kindergartens, playgroups, crèches, early intervention settings and similar services” for
children from birth to five (DEEWR, 2009).

1.9.6 Informant

In this study the informant was a Ngaanyatjarra person, native speaker and
Aboriginal Liaison Officer employed by the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network. The
informant was not trained by, nor had any affiliation with, Montessori pedagogy.

1.9.7 Montessori pedagogy

Montessori pedagogy is an alternative method of education and that comprises
both learning environment and the learning materials. Montessori learning
environments are defined as being “prepared to allow children to be socially and
intellectually independent. Montessori learning materials are designed to capture
children’s interest and attention and to encourage independent use” (Feez, 2010, p. 16).

1.9.8 Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network

Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network comprises nine remote Aboriginal
communities in the central western desert in Western Australia. All communities in the
area have the highest remote scaling by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS].

1.9.9 Teacher-researcher

The teacher-researcher has worked in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network
since 2011. She holds a Bachelor of Education, majoring in Early Childhood education,
and has an Association Montessori International (AMI) Diploma of Primary (2.5 to 6+
years) from Perugia Training Centre, Italy.

1.10 CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The structure of the thesis consists of seven chapters. Table 1.1 provides an
overview of this structure.
Table 1.1

*Overview of the Thesis Structure*

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1.9.1 Chapter outlines

Chapter One, “Research defined”, presents the purpose, motivation and background of the research. The general research question is identified along with four specific research questions. The chapter presents a personal statement from the researcher, the research design, significance of the research and limitations of the research.

Chapter Two, “Context of the research”, presents three dimensions of context that contribute to the understanding of the research into Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. These are: geographical setting; Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network; and Papulankutja Remote Community and Campus.

Chapter Three, “Review of literature”, presents three areas of review relevant to the study. These are: a review of current policies and practices in Early Childhood education in Australia; a review of the current policies in Aboriginal education and; a review of Montessori pedagogy. The final section indicates how the literature review highlights the research.

Chapter Four, “Design of the research” maps out the research approach that was utilised to investigate the inquiry. The theoretical framework drew its epistemology from a qualitative foundation, utilising interpretivism as its theoretical perspective. Specifically, the interpretive lens that the inquiry utilised was that of phenomenology.
The methodology employed in the research was an individual case study that sought to explore the effect of Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. The cohort participants comprised of 17 students. The method of data collection and management are explained. Issues of trustworthiness are considered and ratified and important ethical considerations for the research are discussed.

Chapter Five, “Presentation of research findings”, is presented in four main parts. These are: student response, student behaviour, language development and community involvement. These sections examine the findings from the data of the teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant. The findings from the data collection are summarised from interviews, a video recording and written records.

Chapter Six, “Discussion”, presents an analysis of the results of the research and addresses the four specific research questions. The chapter discusses the student response, student behaviour, language development and community involvement in relation to Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program.

Chapter Seven, “Conclusion”, reviews the results of the research project in relation to the stated purpose of the study. Following a summary of research design the general research question is addressed. A conclusion to the research is then presented and an outline of possible contributions the research makes to scholarly debate. Lastly, implications for stakeholders of Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program are addressed along with suggestions for further research.