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

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CHAPTER TWO
CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 INTRODUCTION
The purpose of the research was to observe and describe the effect of Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. The Aboriginal students were selected from the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network Papulankutja Campus, Western Australia. Underpinning the research was the belief that Montessori pedagogy may provide remote Aboriginal students with an alternative and culturally relevant method of education. In this chapter, three dimensions of the context will be explored to develop an understanding of the environment in which the study took place. Context provides “a description and understanding of a person’s social environment or an organization’s political context [and] is essential for overall understanding of what is observed” (Patton, 1990, p. 49). The three relevant dimensions of the context of this study are: (a) geographical setting; (b) the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network; and (c) the Papulankutja Remote Community/Campus. The geographical setting highlights the physical environment and the extreme remoteness of the Papulankutja Campus. The Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network provides a background to the unique structure and history of the school network. The Ngaanyatjarra Lands School, Papulankutja Campus outlines the distinctive history and cultural background of the remote Aboriginal community where the study took place. The Papulankutja Early Childhood program participants are a very distinct group of Aboriginal students within the central western desert of Australia.

2.2 GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING
A large proportion of Australia is sparsely inhabited (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). In 2011 ABS recorded over 60,000 Indigenous Australians living in “very remote” Australia in 1,008 “very remote” communities (ABS, 2011b; Fordham, 2006). Within Australia over 250 Indigenous languages are spoken (ABS, 2011b).

Education for Aboriginal students in remote Australia faces many challenges. One of these challenges is limited access to education services, libraries, technological education and support (Fordham, 2006). Parents, caregivers and the wider community
are often limited in the way in which they can support their children in obtaining an education (Boulden, Hilson & Tyne, 2010). The Australian Early Development Index [AEDI] National Report 2012 (DEEWR, 2013) identified key developmental indicators that can be used to compare the development of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in pre-school years. These indicators are: physical health and well-being, language and cognitive skills, social competence, emotional maturity, and communication and general knowledge domains (DEEWR, 2013). The findings of AEDI National Report 2012 concluded, “Indigenous children are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than non-indigenous children” (DEEWR, 2013, p. 5). It is important that these findings be acknowledged within this research study, as they highlight the need to address the vulnerability of Indigenous children.

The second area that is significant to the study relates to the geographical setting described through the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia [ARIA]. The Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] devised ARIA because of the increasing concern for people living in rural and remote areas of Australia (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001). ABS defined remoteness based upon “the distance people must travel along a road network to get to service centres: areas where they can access goods, services and opportunities for social interaction” (ABS, 2001). The main aim of ARIA is to provide a national standard for remoteness (ABS, 2001). Figure 2.1 represents the current ABS remoteness structure (ABS, 2011a).

The ARIA score incorporates a classification system using five levels of remoteness as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

ARIA Classification levels of remoteness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of remoteness</th>
<th>ARIA rating</th>
<th>Description of rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly accessible</td>
<td>0 - 1.84</td>
<td>Relativity unrestricted to a wide range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible</td>
<td>&gt;1.84 - 3.51</td>
<td>Some restrictions to accessibility of some goods, services and opportunities for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately accessible</td>
<td>&gt;3.51 - 5.80</td>
<td>Significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>&gt;5.80 - 9.08</td>
<td>Very restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Remote</td>
<td>&gt;9.08 - 12</td>
<td>Locality disadvantaged – very little accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the ARIA classification system, the Papulankutja Remote Community’s score is 12.0000 with an ARIA rating of ‘very remote’ (Measuring Remoteness: ARIA, n.d.). A key factor of remoteness is population. The link between population and accessibility to education requires that the government ensures appropriate planning and funding is provided (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001).

2.3 NGAANYATJARRA LANDS SCHOOL NETWORK

The second dimension discusses the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network. There are three areas to the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network that are significant to the study: History of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network, current policies in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network and link between Ngaanyatjarra students’ home and school life.

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network lies under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education of Western Australia. The school network caters for 316 students from Kindergarten to Year 12 (ACARA, 2014a). The Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network comprises nine remote campuses managed as one school in the
Western Desert (Ng Lands School Website, 2014). These schools are located across 250,000 square kilometres, “approximately 3 percent of mainland Australia” (Kral, 2012, p.14). An Executive Principal leads the school and each campus has a Campus Principal. The school campuses include Warburton, Tjirrkarli, Wanarn, Mantamaru (Jameson), Papulankutja (Blackstone), Irrunytju (Wingellina), Warakurna, Tjukurla and Kiwirrkurra (Ngaanyatjarra Lands School, 2014). Figure 2.2 depicts the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network.

![Figure 2.2 Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network. Retrieved from http://static.ngurra.org/img/map2009.png](http://static.ngurra.org/img/map2009.png)

Using the ARIA classification system, the average score of all nine campuses of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network is 12.0000 with an ARIA rating of Very Remote (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001). The majority of students are Aboriginal whose first languages are Western Desert Languages: Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara (Kral, 2012; Ngaanyatjarra Lands School, 2014).

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network was developed in 2007 with the Education, Training and Lifelong Learning Framework Agreement between the Ngaanyatjarra Council, the Commonwealth Government and the State Government of Western Australia (ACARA, 2014a). The agreement formed The Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network with the aim to provide a framework and structure for education and training in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. This agreement recognised that education and
training outcomes in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands were below adequate standards (Australian Government, Government of Western Australia & Ngaanyatjarra Council, 2007).

Attendance is a major issue of concern in Aboriginal education. In 2014, The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) mandated the Remote Aboriginal Attendance Strategy to address the issue. A history of research outlined attendance as presently a key issue of concern (Harrison, 2012; O’Keefe, Olney & Angus, 2012; Price, 2012). Specifically in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network, many different attendance strategies have been implemented to overcome the issue of attendance. Attendance in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network is very difficult to predict due to cultural traditions and transiency.

The traditional methods of education in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands differ from mainstream practices. Beryl Jennings, a local Ngaanyatjarra elder commented, “How do children learn Ngaanyatjarra way? They learn when Grandpop talks to them. Also they learn by watching – looking at Nanna making wirra (digging bowl) or making damper” (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006, p. 24). She added, “They talk about the activities in Ngaanyatjarra, they copy each other, they play with the same things every day – they are learning” (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006, p. 24). Ngaanyatjarra children learn by watching or observation, by talking in their home language, Ngaanyatjarra, with their family members and by copying or imitating (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006). It is important that these traditional methods of teaching and learning are considered in the current teaching practices and context for remote schooling.

Strong community and school partnerships are also viewed as essential in remote education (Harrison, 2005; Harrison & Sellwood, 2016). As such, the employment of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer provides this much needed link between Ngaanyatjarra students’ home and school life. The Aboriginal Liaison Officer for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network is a bilingual representative of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands region. This Liaison Officer and the elders of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands want to educate Ngaanyatjarra students on the “two worlds we got: Cultural and Western” (Interview, 2013). These two worlds include Dreaming stories (tjukurrpa), hunting,
gathering, making damper and Western society. The Aboriginal Liaison Officer for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network stated,

We want to learn English so we have the knowledge to talk up and keep learning. We want to do maths, and learn about technology and the world outside our community. We want to become strong and responsible people who can earn money and help our communities in the future. We want to build, show and receive, respect” (Ngaanyatjarra Lands School, 2014).

The Aboriginal Liaison Officer and Ngaanyatjarra elders work with the school community to ensure a collaborative approach to education (Ngaanyatjarra Lands School, 2014). The Aboriginal Liaison Officer works side-by-side with the Executive Principal.

2.4 PAPULANKUTJA REMOTE COMMUNITY/ CAMPUS

The third dimension discusses the Papulankutja Remote Community/Campus. The Papulankutja Remote Community has been described as one of the most remote communities in Australia and is located in the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku, Western Australia. It is a small and isolated community with a population in the order of 150 people situated approximately 60 kilometres northwest of the Western Australia, South Australia and Northern Territory tri-state border (Acker & Carty, 2011). The Community is located half way between Mantamaru and Irrunytju. Figure 2.3 depicts Papulankutja from the air.

Figure 2.3 Papulankutja Remote Community from the air (from researcher’s own collection)
The Papulankutja campus of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network is located in the northerly point of the Goldfields District. Teaching and support staff at the Papulankutja Campus comprise a Campus Principal, an Early Childhood class teacher, a Middle Primary teacher and a Secondary teacher. There are three classrooms, library, home economics room, administration building and absolution block. At the time of the study, 52 students were on the school attendance roll.

Teachers and staff use instructional commands in the native Ngaanyatjarra language in order for the classroom to function effectively, especially in the Early Childhood class. Students use limited Standard Australian English [SAE]. English as an additional language is often a barrier in remote classrooms. The people of Papulankutja share the culture, art and tjukurrpa with the younger generations continuing the connection to country and honouring the ancient heritage of the Ngaanyatjarra region (Kral, 2012). Figure 2.4 depicts the Papulankutja women teaching the school children tjanpi (weaving) on a bush trip in November 2013.

Figure 2.4. Papulankutja women teaching the school children tjanpi (weaving) on a bush trip in November 2013 (from researcher’s own collection).
Ngaanyatjarra is the native form of oral language in Papulankutja, and is the most common language used (Kral, 2012). Community members have a limited understanding of SAE. Papulankutja Remote Community remains highly traditional in cultural terms and community members participate heavily in major ceremonies that link them to various other communities and regions (Ah Kit, 2003). The area around Papulankutja contains some of the most significant sacred sites in the Ngaanyatjarra region. The Ngaanyatjarra and Papulankutja people have an uninterrupted occupation of their land (Kral, 2012).

The people’s connection to country is referred to in Ngaanyatjarra language as *tjukurrpa* (Brooks, 2013). The *yarnangu* (people) are at the centre of the universe and they hold the key role in management for their land (Brooks, 2013). Brooks (2013) emphasised, “People are owned by the land, rather than owning it” (p. 7). The natural world or country is the “birthplace or inheritance of all Ngaanyatjarra people” (Brooks, 2013, p. 8). Ngaanyatjarra people refer to their birthplace as “my ngurra, my country” (Brooks, 2013, p. 9). Papulankutja Remote Community members hold this connection to their ngurra (country).

### 2.5 CONCLUSION

Within the context of the study, three dimensions were explored. These dimensions were: geographical setting, the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network and the Papulankutja Remote Community/Campus. The first dimension discussed the geographical setting and two areas: ARIA and remote Aboriginal Australia. The second dimension, the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network, presented the history, current policies and the link between the Ngaanyatjarra students’ home and school life. The third dimension outlined the Papulankutja Remote Community/Campus and discussed the geographical location, school/campus environment and history of the remote community.