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

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CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the research was to observe and describe the effect of Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. The general research question for the study was: What is the effect of Montessori pedagogy on Aboriginal students in a remote Early Childhood program? The four specific research questions addressed were:

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?

The following chapter considers each of these four specific research questions in light of the key themes that have emerged from the study and discusses the significance of each within the context of current educational literature.

6.2 STUDENT RESPONSE TO MONTESSORI PEDAGOGY

In what ways do Aboriginal students respond to Montessori pedagogy within a remote Early Childhood program?

The findings of the research suggest that remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students respond to Montessori pedagogy in three ways: concentration and engagement; student autonomy; and student independence. Current literature in Aboriginal and Early Childhood education supports these responses.

6.2.1. Concentration and engagement

Recent literature concerning Aboriginal education supports teaching and learning practices to engage Aboriginal students in classroom environments. Teachers and AIEOs need to collaborate to build an environment to assist in the process of
engagement. Specifically, Price (2012) stated, “A culturally competent teacher, along with increased members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employed in schools, will foster engagement with, and participation by, local Indigenous communities, and will build positive learning relationships with Indigenous children” (p. 168). Attendance and engagement are closely linked within remote Aboriginal educational settings (MCEECDYA, 2010). To build student engagement, educators should work in partnership with parents, caregivers and the wider community. Literature suggested that schools and institutions should seek to incorporate traditional Aboriginal child-rearing techniques into classroom teaching practices (Harrison, 2005; Yunkaporta, 2009; Robinson & Nichol, 1998). Montessori pedagogy fosters learning and engagement by strategies that support the autonomy of the child.

The findings of this research indicated that within a Montessori classroom, distractions are minimised. Therefore, students are able to concentrate and engage in learning experiences. The remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students of this study, demonstrated high levels of concentration as the learning experiences planned and undertaken were of personal interest. The Montessori classroom also provided a clear classroom structure and routine for students to develop their skills of concentration. The current lead policy in Aboriginal education in Western Australia indicated that it is the role of education facilities to build strong community and school relationships to support genuine engagement and interaction (Department of Education Western Australia, 2015). As noted in the study, the positive relationship and engagement of the community encouraged the students to attend and be actively involved in the classroom.

Montessori pedagogy provided the opportunity for the teacher and AIEO’s to work one-on-one with students. The students’ self-selected the work that they would like to complete. As a result, the students’ were engaged as the tasks undertaken were of personal interest (Montessori, 1966). Current literature supports the direct correlation between Aboriginal ways of learning and personal interest. Specifically, Harrison (2011) commented, “Aboriginal students are more motivated by activities where the meaning is self-evident” (p. 42). Literature pointed to the importance to making learning meaningful and exciting for students (Greeno, 1998; Leeper & Henderlong, 2000). In addition, teaching and learning practices should link to prior learning. Aboriginal students are engaged in learning tasks by relating the content to personal interest.
(Harrison, 2011). Within the Montessori pedagogy, the role of the teacher is to link the students with Montessori materials to ensure learning is meaningful and engagement and concentration occurred (Lillard, 2005). There are numerous examples of the students' engagement with the Montessori materials that have been documented in this research.

6.2.2 Autonomy

Self-reliance and autonomy is a key characteristic of traditional child-rearing techniques (Harrison & Sellwood, 2016). Montessori pedagogy, the focus of this study, provided a learning environment that aligned with Aboriginal cultural child-rearing practices. The fourth principle of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) stresses the need for educators to support the “histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child-rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families” (p. 13). These traits are reflected in the literature which highlight the importance of developing students’ skills of independence and self-reliance (Gollan & Malin, 2012). Montessori pedagogy provides a learning environment that aligned with this principle. Therefore, there is a natural connection between the school and home environment. Recent literature suggests, “Aboriginal parents control their children more indirectly than non-Aboriginal parents” (Harrison, 2011, p. 156). The findings of this research indicated that Montessori pedagogy aligns strongly with Aboriginal child-rearing techniques. Independence is a central characteristic of Montessori methodology (Block, 2015; Cossentino, 2005; Harrison & Sellwood, 2016; Johnson, 2016). Therefore, the school teaching and learning environment was better suited to the Aboriginal child’s home environment (EYLF). The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) strongly supports the aligning of child-rearing practices and the learning environment.

It is well recognised that people have a basic need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Autonomy is a core element of a Montessori classroom as children learn best when they have freely chosen the activity (Feez, 2010; Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011; Lillard, 2005). Within the Montessori pedagogy there is a strong emphasis on freedom of choice and movement (Block, 2015; Cossentino, 2005). A child in a Montessori environment is encouraged to explore and discover through the materials (Johnson, 2016).
Within the Montessori pedagogy classroom observed student autonomy was demonstrated. Literature suggests that the level of autonomy presented in a Montessori classroom can often be surprising to visitors (Lillard, 2005). The high levels of student autonomy within the Montessori classroom correlates to Aboriginal student’s home life. Literature pointed to the importance of connecting teaching and learning practices to students’ way of life as currently mainstream methods of education are not supporting learning as strongly as needed (Tjitayi, 2013).

6.2.3 Independence

Recent literature in Aboriginal education supports the concepts of independence and freedom for Aboriginal students. Specifically, Harrison (2011) noted, “Aboriginal students in their first years at school, such non-compliance is generally innocently carried out” (p. 157). Montessori teaching and learning practices support the Aboriginal students in a way that is very similar to their home environment. Research in Aboriginal education highlights the importance of traditional Aboriginal child-rearing techniques such as independence and autonomy (Beresford, Harrison, 2011; Harrison & Sellwood, 2016; Partington & Gower, 2012; Perso & Hayward, 2015; Price, 2012). Independence is at the core of Montessori pedagogy, as the classroom allows for as much freedom and independence as possible, dependent on the students developmental level, leaving them free to engage in the chosen activity (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011). Students are able to independently select what activity that would like to complete, when they would like to repeat it, for the duration they desire and where they would like to complete the activity (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011, Lillard, 2005; Feez, 2010). Within the Montessori pedagogy environment, the role of the teacher is to help students work independently with minimal adult support. Student independence then transpires to children from an early age, developing the individual's self-confidence (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011).

Current Early Childhood policies and current Aboriginal education literature indicated students respond to teaching and learning when participation, engagement, connection, resilience, confidence and independence are carried out in the classroom setting (ACECQA, 2012; Barblett, 2010; Brewer, 2006; DEEWR, 2009; McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2010). Specifically in Aboriginal Education, Price (2012) commented, “Teachers could ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
move towards a student-centric, teacher-guided learning environment in which the student takes primary responsibility for their own learning and educational outcomes” (p. 123). These attributes are at the heart of the Montessori pedagogy and were evident in much of the data collected in this research study.

6.2.4 Summary

The findings of the research highlighted that remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students responded to Montessori pedagogy in three ways: concentration and engagement; autonomy; and independence. There is evidence to suggest that there is a connection between traditional Aboriginal child-rearing techniques, Aboriginal ways of learning and Montessori pedagogy.

6.3 STUDENT BEHAVIOUR IN RESPONSE TO MONTESSORI PEDAGOGY

In what ways has Montessori pedagogy impacted on student behaviour within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program?

The findings of the research suggest that student behaviour in the classroom can be viewed in three ways: suits students with high transiency; student persistence; and peer modelling. Current literature in Aboriginal and Early Childhood education support these responses.

6.3.1 Suits students with high transience

The data from the teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant identified that remote Aboriginal students are often absent or late to class due to cultural events. Literature suggested that there are various reason why Aboriginal students are more likely to be transient (Harrison, 2011). These reasons include: attending funerals, visiting family, and being in closer proximity to a family member who may be in jail (Harrison, 2011). The findings from this research highlighted that Montessori pedagogy provided a classroom routine and structure that minimalised the effect of interruptions to the students’ learning. The Montessori classroom allowed students to independently begin a task and without being directly affected by peers arriving sporadically. Beginning a lesson at the start of the day can often be difficult because the students arrive at random times of the day (Harrison, 2011). Montessori pedagogy classrooms facilitate a ‘no time wasted’ approach, making the most of every learning opportunity.
Ideally, students are always learning and can adjust to high levels of transiency through familiar classroom routines.

The findings of this research identified that Montessori pedagogy complemented remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students’ cultural traditions (DEEWR, 2009). When students returned from visiting other communities for cultural reasons they were able to resume learning activities with minimal teacher guidance, demonstrating student autonomy and independence. According to DEEWR (2009), Early Childhood educators should “honour the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices by families” (p. 13). Student transiency is a result of cultural traditions and students attending these cultural traditions should be planned for by schools and integrated into teaching and learning practices (ACECQA, 2012; DEEWR, 2009).

In relation to the duration of the absence, it is recognised that students are expected to attend family business, such as funerals, and that these events may “last for a couple of weeks rather than a day” (Harrison, 2011, p. 51). Within the school context, students, parents, caregivers and the wider community may not feel comfortable and culturally safe in the school environment. Schools should value and encourage diversity enabling students, parents, caregivers and the wider community to feel supported in the school environment thus increasing student attendance and engagement regardless of student transiency (MCEECDYA, 2010). Commentary from the participants in this research study indicated that the parents of the students in the classroom appeared to be comfortable and supported through the Montessori pedagogy.

6.3.2 Student persistence

The findings from this research indicated that Montessori pedagogy encourages the behaviour of persistence with students through this approach. Persistence is demonstrated through turn taking and patience in waiting for a specific learning material in the classroom program (Cossentino, 2005; Regni, 2015). Each material had only one copy in the learning environment. Students had to exercise prosocial behaviours while waiting to complete the task of their choice when a peer was already engaged with the activity. The collective response of the people observing in this study, confirmed that
the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students exercised high levels of persistence to work with the material of their choice.

The data confirmed that the students in the Montessori classroom felt a strong sense of pride for their learning environment. Specifically, the informant stated:

 Yuwa (yes)! They (Papulankutja kids) proud of it! They really proud that it’s in Blackstone. They know what they have do but when they go to another school they don’t feel comfortable and they think back that Blackstone way is better, doing that Montessori. And it’s ninti (smart).

Literature confirmed that within an Aboriginal education program, Aboriginal students need to feel pride in their learning environment (Sarra, 2008). The Papulankutja Early Childhood students felt proud of their classroom. Current lead policy documents in Early Childhood education support the concept of pride for the environment and that it comes from students’ culture and language being respected. The response of students to teaching and learning practices increases when the learning environment embraces children’s culture and language as they feel valued and safe (MCEEDYA, 2010; DEEWR, 2009; Department of Education Western Australia, 2012).

6.3.3 Peer modelling

The data from this study indicated that Montessori pedagogy supported peer modelling in the teaching and learning environment. Multi-aged grouping is a key characteristic of Montessori classrooms (Cossentino, 2005; Feez, 2010; Lillard, 2005). The social environment of the Montessori classroom uses multi-age grouping as a way of enhancing the meaningfulness of peer relationships. Multi-age grouping allows the student to use these skills in real-life situations (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011; Lillard, 2005). Multi-age grouping reflects a family environment as students aspire to the older peers and other students learn to treat those younger with respect and care (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2011). Through multi-aged groupings, students engage in peer modelling. Peer modelling was evident in the student behaviour of the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood cohort. Through the practice of peer modelling, students are directly and indirectly observing one another. Aboriginal people learn by “observation, modelling, imitation” (Harrison, 2011, p. 44) and not just by listening and speaking (Harris, 1984; Hughes, More & Williams, 2004).
Peer modelling was viewed as central to the culture of the Montessori classroom and this aligns with current Aboriginal education literature (Harris, 1984; Harrison, 2011, Hughes, More & Williams, 2004). Early Childhood policy documents highlight that peer modelling allows children to “mirror, repeat and practice the actions of others, either immediately or later” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 36). Peer modelling generated positive student behaviour and provided a safe and secure learning environment (DEEWR, 2009). Imitation is a key contributor to a child’s neurological development as he or she repeats actions within the environment around him or her. This process is entitled, “Mirror Neuron Systems” [MNS] (Meltzoff, Williamson & Marshall, 2013). Montessori pedagogy supports current research in paediatric neuroscience of MNS and aligns with Aboriginal traditions of learning by observation and imitation (Harrison, 2011).

6.3.4 Summary

The data by the teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant emphasised that remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students responded to Montessori pedagogy in three ways: suits students with high transiency; student persistence; and peer modelling. Literature highlighted the importance of Montessori pedagogy providing a teaching and learning pedagogy that supported and respected Aboriginal culture, traditions and history.

6.4 LANGUAGE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

In what ways has Montessori pedagogy impacted on language learning and development within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program?

The results of the research suggested that language learning and development in a remote Aboriginal early childhood using Montessori pedagogy was supported in three ways: One-on-one learning; AIEO participation; and Montessori curriculum and development. Current literature in Aboriginal and Early Childhood education support these responses.

6.4.1 One-on-one learning

The findings of this research indicated that one-on-one learning within the classroom assisted the teacher and the AIEO’s to cater for the children's specific learning needs. The teacher and AIEO’s role within the Montessori environment was to
connect the students to the learning materials appropriate to their level of development (Cossentino, 2005; Johnson, 2016). The connection process occurred in both SAE and Ngaanyatjarra with the teacher and the AIEOs collaborating and promoting the use of both languages. Montessori pedagogy uses individualised instruction and students receive directions one-on-one.

Current literature in Aboriginal education confirms that students do not respond well to large group instruction. Specifically, the remote Early Childhood students have limited knowledge of SAE and may only speak Ngaanyatjarra. The AIEOs are the main connection for the children as they can communicate in the home language. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) strongly supports and respects the position of students’ home languages. The Montessori classroom observed in this study provided one-on-one learning for students in SAE and in Ngaanyatjarra.

6.4.2 AIEO Participation

Those involved in the data collection, who observed the classroom of this study, indicated that the AIEOs participation in the learning environment, especially in language development was essential. The AIEOs participation in the classroom supported and assisted the students' development of their home language (Ngaanyatjarra) and lead to the development of SAE. Literature and policy documents in Aboriginal and Early childhood education indicate that the student’s home language must be respected, valued and reflected in the teaching and learning practices (DEEWR, 2009; Harris, 1984; Hughes, More & Williams, 2004; Perso & Hayward, 2015).

The literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers (AIEO’s) is significant to language development in remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students as AIEO’s provide the link between home and school environment. AIEO’s were able to communicate with the students in home language and act as a bridge for teachers in SAE. Specifically, DEEWR (2009) stated, “Educators promote learning when they value children’s linguistic heritage and with family and community members encourage the use of and acquisition of home language and SAE” (p .40). The collaboration of the AIEO’s and the teacher both delivering language lessons in SAE and Ngaanyatjarra provided a foundation for the two to work together. The teacher and
the AIEOs built positive professional relationships to work with the students (DEEWR, 2009; Harris, 1984; Hughes, More & Williams, 2004; Perso & Hayward, 2015).

6.4.3 Montessori curriculum and development

The findings of this research indicated that Montessori curriculum and practices supported the development of the student’s language in both SAE and in Ngaanyatjarra. The development was supported directly and indirectly from the teacher and AIEO’s (Regni, 2015). The Montessori curriculum was generally presented in one-on-one presentations to the children and allowed the teacher and AIEOs to cater to the students level of language. Through the use of one-on-one delivery, the child does not run the risk of being shamed by his or her peers and assists in the development of self-confidence. Current literature in Aboriginal education highlights the importance of building self-confidence and not shaming students in the educational setting (Harrison, 2011; Perso & Hayward, 2015; Price, 2012).

6.4.4 Summary

The data from this research specified that Montessori pedagogy supported language learning and development in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program in three ways: one-on-one learning; AIEO participation; and Montessori curriculum and development. Literature stressed the significance of Montessori pedagogy providing a teaching and learning pedagogy that reinforced and appreciated Aboriginal culture, especially, the embedding of the Ngaanyatjarra language.

6.5 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In what ways has Montessori pedagogy engaged community members to interact within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program?

The outcomes of the research indicated that community members engaged in the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood that was using Montessori pedagogy. Two themes evident from the study were: visits from parents and caregivers; and classroom environment and structure. Current literature and policy documents in Aboriginal and Early Childhood education are consistent with these themes (DEEWR, 2009; DEEWR, 2016; Department of Education Western Australia, 2015; Guenther, 2012; Harrison & Selwood, 2016; Munns, O’Rourke & Bodkin-Andrews, 2013; National Congress for Australia’s First Peoples, 2016; Perso & Hayward, 2015).
6.5.1 Visits from parents and caregivers

The findings of this research point to the positive partnerships between the school staff (teachers and AIEO’s) and the parents and caregivers. Current policy documents highlight that, “Children thrive when families and educators work together in partnership to support young children’s learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). Montessori pedagogy created a positive one-on-one learning environment for parents and caregivers to engage in their children’s learning. The data suggested that parents and caregivers were able to engage in positive teaching and learning experiences with their child in Ngaanyatjarra and in SAE. Current policy documents indicate that schools that work in partnership with the community have opportunity for greater success in making sustainable change (Department of Education Western Australia, 2012; MCEEDYA, 2010).

It is essential for schools to build strong relationships with the parents, caregivers and wider community. To build strong relationships, all school staff need to be patient, respectful and build their knowledge and acceptance of cultural traditions community (Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2015; Department of Education Western Australia, 2015; Harrison & Selwood, 2016; Lester, 2013; McKnight, 2016; Munns, O’Rourke & Bodkin-Andrews, 2013; Nakata, 2007; National Congress for Australia’s First Peoples, 2016; Osborne, 2013; Perso & Hayward, 2015). The purpose of undertaking this research study was to explore whether the outcomes of an alternative Montessori pedagogy would provide a more culturally appropriate education for this remote Aboriginal Early Childhood classroom. It would appear from the responses of the parents and caregivers that such a curriculum may facilitate greater community participation.

6.5.2 Classroom environment and routines

The data from this study revealed that the Montessori classroom was engaging to parents, caregivers and the wider community. In addition, the classroom environment fostered positive teaching and learning experiences for the students and their families to share with one another. The importance of community involvement is crucial in the link between the home and school environment as parents/caregiver and families are “children’s first and most influential educators” (DEEWR 2009, p. 5). Early Childhood environments should support relationships and engagement of parents, caregivers and
the wider community. The Montessori class in this research was clean, organised and welcoming to visitors. The aim of Montessori pedagogy is to provide children and visitors with learning environment that enhance and support “development of social, intellectual and ethical independence” (Montessori Australia Foundation 2011, p. 3).

Current policy documents in Early Childhood education highlight that, learning environments should be welcoming to students, parents and caregivers and the community (ACECQA, 2010; DEEWR, 2009.). As stated, “Learning environments are welcoming spaces when they reflect and enrich the lives and identities of children and families participating in the setting and respond to their interests and needs” (EYLF, 2009, p. 15). Learning environments should permit Aboriginal parents, caregivers and the wider community to support their children’s education and attendance. Providing a culturally inclusive and best practice teaching and learning environment can “help Aboriginal children get the best start to life” (Department of Education Western Australia, 2012, p. 5). Evidence from this study into the impact of Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program suggests that the classroom environment and routines play an important role in engaging parents and caregivers in their children’s education.

6.5.3 Summary

The findings of this study highlighted the impact of Montessori pedagogy on community engagement in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program in two ways: visits from parents and caregivers; and classroom environment and structure. The importance of Montessori pedagogy providing a teaching and learning practice that strengthened and respected the building of strong relationships with the parents, caregivers and wider community in the remote context is well supported by current research.

6.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an explanatory and analytical discussion of the data provided in Chapter Five. The data presented for each of the four key themes alongside relevant literature according to each specific research question. This chapter provides the basis for the final chapter: Chapter Seven: Conclusion.