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

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CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

7.1 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the research was to observe and describe the effect of Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program to ascertain whether this alternative method of education provides a more culturally appropriate practice. The Closing the Gap Report 2016 stated that the majority of Indigenous children in remote locations are not reaching minimum standards (DPMC, 2016). Thus, underpinning this study, is the belief that Aboriginal children must be provided with every opportunity to reach, or exceed, minimum standards in literacy and numeracy. Montessori pedagogy may enable Aboriginal Early Childhood students in a remote community to engage more readily in the learning program, thus supporting the development of their literacy and numeracy skills.

7.2 DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

The methodological structure underlying this research was that of an individual case study. This individual case study of the Early Childhood class in Papulankutja Remote Community was explored to better understand the effect of Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. The general research question for this study was: What is the effect of Montessori pedagogy on Aboriginal students in a remote Early Childhood program? The four specific research questions to be 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?

Data collection methods used were: (a) video recording and an observational framework by the teacher-researcher; (b) journal writing by the teacher-researcher; (c)
ten observational frameworks completed by the critical friend; and (d) three one-on-one interviews with the informant. The teacher-researcher video recorded the classroom program at various times during the week to document daily events and activities. The data were recorded using the observational framework. The teacher-researcher maintained a journal throughout the study recording her annotations and impressions of how the participants in the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood class responded to Montessori pedagogy. The critical friend observed the program and completed observational records (general and individual).

Data analysis consisted of identifying themes through content analysis and use of research questions. Content analysis was applied to the journal entries, general observational framework, the individual observational framework and transcribed informant one-on-one interviews. These forms of data provided anticipatory data consolidation through the use of themes and key words. Interim data consolidation was utilised through coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For the data presentation, the journal entries, general and individual observational frameworks, and transcribed informant one-on-one interviews were colour-coded according to themes. Conclusions were drawn directly from the research questions and supported by the data through content analysis.

7.3 GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION ADDRESSED

What is the effect of Montessori pedagogy on Aboriginal students in a remote Early Childhood program?

The findings from this study draw numerous comparisons between Montessori pedagogy, traditional Aboriginal child-rearing techniques and The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF is the key policy for Early Childhood education in Australia. This Framework has five specific principles and outcomes (Table 7.1). To address the general research question, links will be drawn between the findings of this research into Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program and the five principles of the EYLF.
Table 7.1

Five principles of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12-13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle One</th>
<th>Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principle Two</td>
<td>Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle Three</td>
<td>High expectations and equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle Four</td>
<td>Respect for diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle Five</td>
<td>Ongoing learning and reflective practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.3.1.1 **Principle One: Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships**  
(DEEWR, 2009, p. 12)

The teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant collectively reported that the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students of this study were engaged and confident in their learning experiences (DEEWR, 2009). Specifically, the informant highlighted that the students were engaged and concentrated on their tasks as they were of personal interest. She commented, “They are making their choice because they are interested.” The students displayed a sense of self-confidence and respect (DEEWR, 2009). They actively participated in the learning environment both independently and with their peers (DEEWR, 2009; Montessori Australia Foundation, 2009). Another student response to Montessori pedagogy was that of autonomy. Specifically, the critical friend noted the “natural autonomy” of remote Aboriginal students and how this response aligns with traditional child-rearing techniques. The Montessori program in this study provided the students with a “secure base for exploration and learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12).

During the data collection period, the informant observed that the participants of this study supported the “visiting students”, that is, students who were stopping over for short periods of time in the classroom. The informant commented:

_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).

The informant highlighted that the students of the remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program were proud of their learning environment. The regular students assisted the
visiting students attending the program to learn about the responsibilities by a combination of teamwork and collaboration with their peers. The students, teacher-researcher and AIEOs interacted in ways that demonstrated the secure, respectful relationships that they had developed in the learning environment.

7.3.1.2 Principle Two: Partnerships (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12)

The teacher-researcher commented on the strategies that she employed when working one-on-one with AIEOs to prepare the Montessori Language materials. This process of the adults collaborating together helped the students to directly develop their skills in SAE and promoted the partnership between the teacher-researcher and the AIEOs. An example of working in partnership with the AIEOs in the learning environment was the use of sandpaper letters. Specifically, the informant noted that the teacher-researcher and the AIEOs were able to work together to cater for language development needs specific to the student’s level of SAE and Ngaanyatjarra. She commented:

I can see the difference that when there’s a big group to when there is one-on-one learning. There is interference in the big group and then there’s nothing when it’s one-on-one. Those tjitji (child), they learning. Yuwa (yes), walykumunu (good).

Montessori pedagogy provided the teacher-researcher and the AIEOs with a structure to engage in one-on-one active teaching and learning in Ngaanyatjarra and SAE (DEEWR, 2009; Montessori Australia Foundation, 2009). In addition, one-on-one learning provided a structure for parents, caregivers and families to engage in the teaching and learning environment (DEEWR, 2009). The research showed that parents, caregivers and the wider community were welcomed into the classroom environment and engaged in active participation and learning with their child. Specifically, the critical friend remarked that when parents and caregivers visited the program “they feel comfortable and validated.” This statement by the critical friend is evidence of a culturally sensitive and genuine partnership between students, parents, caregivers, community members, AIEOs and the teacher-researcher. The teacher-researcher and the AIEOs worked together to share ideas and collectively make curriculum decisions. The teacher-researcher felt privileged to work alongside Ngaanyatjarra people in the day-to-day classroom routines and especially in conducting this study.
7.3.1.3  Principle Three: High expectations and equality (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12)

The teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant reported that the students were able to freely select their own work and carry out the learning tasks with minimal teacher interruption. The students demonstrated levels of high expectation as they were independently accountable for their learning (DEEWR, 2009). Specifically, the teacher-researcher noted that students were able to pause and restart their learning activity when they wished. The teacher-researcher observed an example:

After fourteen minutes, the student indicated she was getting tired and would like to pause the work. The student collected her laminated name from the wall and places it at her desk. Subsequently, no other students were allowed to touch this work.

The action of pausing the learning activity highlighted the student’s ability to recognise when she required a short break. In addition, the student’s peers respected her choice to pause and did not interfere with the activity. The process of pausing and returning to the activity provided a clear practice to ensure “all children have opportunities to achieve learning outcomes” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13).

The informant commented on the concentration levels observed. She noted:

The difference in Montessori is when tjitji (child) come in (to the classroom) and they (the child) chose what they want to do. They really focus on what they trying to do. The teacher can come, sit down and work with the tjitji (child). There is no other humbugging cause they’re (the other students) all doing other work (pointing around the different parts of the room). They are making their choice because they interested.

Students held high expectations of themselves in the Montessori learning environment. Independently the students took ownership of their learning experiences (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2009). As a result, the students were able to “achieve educational success” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13).

The teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant commented on the presence of peer modelling within the program. For example, the critical friend stated, “older students model positive classroom behaviours and the younger students copy these behaviours.” Through peer modelling, students were able to demonstrate their learning experiences to those visiting the classroom. Students, parents, caregivers and
family members interacted in a positive way showing reciprocal relationships. The informant highlighted an example of positive relationships. She remarked:

_Yuwa_ (yes), I see when the mummy comes in to sit down in the class. She (the mummy) is watching, looking after the kids and helping them in Ngaanyatjarra. Sitting down one on one with her child.

This observation made by the informant is evidence that Montessori pedagogy involves students, parents, caregivers and family members as active participants in their child’s learning. These opportunities provided practices for effective “inclusion and participation” in students' learning (DEEWR, 2009, p.13).

7.3.1.4 **Principle Four: Respect for diversity (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13)**

The teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant noted that the Montessori curriculum and practices in the program supported the “values and beliefs of the individual families and communities” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13). The findings indicated that the needs of the children and their families were being incorporated into the classroom routine. Specifically, the critical friend stated that the language development and learning program “made allowances for one-on-one teacher learning” with the teacher-researcher and the AIEO’s. The program respected the students’ culture and most importantly, home language. As stated in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), “respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families” (p. 13). The Montessori program in this study aimed to respect diversity by supporting the students, their families and the wider community’s values and beliefs.

The teacher-researcher, critical friend and informant commented on the high transiency of students in the program. As stated in the context chapter, students of the program often travelled to other remote communities for cultural events and may arrive late during the classroom learning routine. For example, the teacher-researcher remarked:

Within the first sixty-minutes of the session, three students arrived separately. Each student entered the classroom, selected a work quietly and began independently. Minimal disruption was made to others.

The program respected the students and families’ traditional practices and heritage by providing a classroom routine that minimalised the impact on student learning if the
student was late to class or absent. The Montessori classroom routine provided an independent and autonomous teaching and learning environment for students.

Aboriginal children are encouraged to be autonomous (Harrison & Sellwood, 2016). Self-reliance is a key characteristic of traditional child-rearing techniques (Harrison & Sellwood, 2016). The fourth principle of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) highlighted that educators must support “histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families” (p. 13). The findings of this study confirmed that the classroom supported autonomy and self-reliance. For example, the informant commented in an interview:

I started to see kids focusing on what they wanted to do. And I was thinking “wow, this is good, this is a good way of learning”. Cause if we have kids with problems like hearing, “they can’t sit down and then they get up quick”. But they are sitting down… (With the teacher) and taking time… one-on-one… they not getting up and coming and going. (Then other kids start) Thinking “Hey! She’s not walking out, she’s just doing it” and then they thinking “Hey! I’ll just sit down do something like that” Yuwa (yes), and it works for the tjitji (child), cause all the little kids, they want to do something by themselves, yuwa (yes). So it’s a really good way of teaching, with Montessori.

This observation by the informant is evidence of the respect for diversity in the Montessori program. The teaching and learning experiences can be presented in SAE or in Ngaanyatjarra by the teacher-researcher and the AIEOs. The students are “born belonging to a culture” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13). The Montessori Early Childhood program supported and respected the students, families and wider communities Ngaanyatjarra culture.

7.3.1.5 Principle Five: Ongoing learning and reflective practice (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13)

The informant observed that the AIEOs of the program provided a crucial link between the students’ home and school life. The AIEOs were able to communicate to the students in their home language, Ngaanyatjarra. The teacher-researcher and the AIEOs collaborated on a regular basis. The teacher-researcher worked one-on-one with AIEOs to present a range of Montessori materials in Practical Life, Sensorial Education, Mathematics but especially Language, to cater to the child’s current level of development in both Ngaanyatjarra and SAE. The teacher-researcher and the AIEOs
became co-learners and worked together to build their professional knowledge of Montessori teaching and learning practices. For example the teacher-researcher commented:

The AIEO worked one-on-one with a six-year old student on a mat to present the letters f, j and r in the three-period lesson format. The AIEO checked the student sandpaper letters record sheet to identify which sounds the student was currently working on. The AIEO used the child’s home language (Ngaanyatjarra).

This statement by the teacher-researcher reinforces the AIEOs professional teaching and learning practice with students. The teacher-researcher and AIEOs collaborated to discuss the process to complete the sandpaper letters presentation with the student sandpaper letters record sheet. The AIEOs presented educational lessons to the children in Ngaanyatjarra instructional language however, the content was communicated in SAE. AIEOs of the program are the bridge between the students’ home and school life (DEEWR, 2009).

7.3.2 Conclusion

The findings of this research have been linked to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). The specific research questions related to student response, student behaviour, language learning and development, and community engagement. The findings of this research clearly indicate the potential for Montessori pedagogy as a viable alternative practice of education for remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students. Section 5.2 described the findings of this research directly relating to the four specific research questions. The researcher of this study noticed a strong link between the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the specific research questions. These findings were strongly reflected in the five principles of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the four specific research questions.

7.4 SUMMARY

This research has made a contribution to the scholarly debate on Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program. Due to the limited body of literature in the area, the study indicated that Aboriginal students in a remote Early Childhood program may be constructed with a readymade disposition to Montessori pedagogy. Tjitayi (2013) commented on Anangu (Aboriginal) education and the need to find an education process that supports Aboriginal children. She noted:
If a tree is not growing properly, we have to seek really hard to find the problem. When we look at the tree, we see only to top part but we need to look deeper at the roots. We must look deep inside to see what is not working. In *Anangu* education, sometimes we spend all out time looking at the leaves and the branches, but we need to look well below the group to understand what is it really happening to our children…We need to see the education process as beginning from a seed and think about how we can support the growth of our children to stand strong on their own (p. 10).

Within the Montessori pedagogy program observed in this study, the Early Childhood students learnt to take responsibility for their own learning and to be purposeful. Additionally, the students learnt to be persistent, not give up on a challenging task and recognised the benefits of sharing with others. Remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students exercise high levels of autonomy within traditional Aboriginal child-rearing techniques and Montessori pedagogy supports these behaviours.

### 7.5 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION

The research on Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program has implications for the following stakeholders:

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) encompassing, Department of Education Western Australia and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network
- Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) encompassing Montessori Australia Foundation
- Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs)
- Parents, caregivers and wider community of Papulankutja Remote Community
- University’s School of Education
- Remote Teaching Service

#### 7.5.1 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) encompassing, Department of Education Western Australia and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network

This study has implications for The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) encompassing, Department of Education Western Australia and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network. Trialling an alternative method of education may address “closing the gap” (DEEWR, 2016, p.1) between Indigenous
and non-Indigenous students in Australia. Montessori pedagogy in a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program may have the capacity to align traditional child-rearing techniques and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Government agencies of Australia who are designing curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students might well consider this study.

7.5.2 Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) encompassing Montessori Australia Foundation (MAF)

This study has implications for the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and specifically, Montessori Association Foundation (MAF) in Australia. The process of delivering Montessori training may need to be reconsidered to make the pedagogy more accessible to teachers and AIEO’s in remote Aboriginal communities. In addition, Montessori training could be extended to parents, caregivers and the wider community to build strong partnerships between the school and wider community. The teacher-researcher acknowledges the issues that surround Aboriginal education are complex and no single alternative method of education would contest these concerns. However, Montessori pedagogy should be acknowledged as an alternative method of education in a remote Aboriginal setting.

7.5.3 Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs)

This study has implications for the training of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs). AIEOs are the bridge between the students’ home and school life. Therefore, AIEOs should be provided with adequate initial and ongoing training to support their professional development. Particularly, the Department of Education Western Australia could reconsider the current education support training programs for AIEOs to include an introduction to Montessori teaching and learning practices, especially in remote Aboriginal contexts.

7.5.4 Parents, caregivers and wider community of Papulankutja (Blackstone) Remote Community

The findings of this research indicate active participation of parents, caregivers and the wider community can provide strong teaching and learning opportunities for students in remote Aboriginal Early Childhood classrooms. This research clearly highlights the importance of the role of parents and caregivers in their children’s
development and the school. Parents, caregivers and wider community should be included in children’s teaching and learning environment as they are the first teachers in a child’s life. The implication of this study lies in the need for parents, caregivers and wider community of Papulankutja (Blackstone) Remote Community and schools to work side-by-side to support students’ learning and development.

7.5.5 University’s School of Education

This study has implications for University’s School of Education providers. Pre-service teachers could be alerted to alternative methods of education, including Montessori pedagogy. Current Aboriginal education literature stated that “little change” (DMPC, 2016, p. 6) has been made to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. University’s School of Education providers may wish to provide more information on alternative methods to deliver a more culturally relevant teaching and learning environment for Indigenous students.

7.5.6 Remote Teaching Service (RTS) programs

This study has implications for the Remote Teaching Service (RTS) programs in Australia. Remote Teaching Service (RTS) programs aim to provide teachers in remote schools with a solid foundation of information for working with remote Indigenous students and building relationships with the parents, caregivers and members of the wider community (Department of Education Western Australia, 2016). The programs may need to be adapted to provide teachers who are beginning their work with Early Childhood students in remote Aboriginal communities with information regarding alternative educational approaches to better suit traditional Aboriginal child-rearing techniques. An alternative approach that could be discussed with beginning teachers is Montessori pedagogy.

7.6 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study suggests two future research possibilities. Firstly, a longitudinal study could be undertaken that observes the Papulankutja Campus Early Childhood students over an extended period of time, for example, one to five years. The study could be undertaken at the beginning and end of each school year. A longitudinal study would allow for fine-tuning of the current study and for possible greater generalisation of Montessori pedagogy within a remote Aboriginal Early Childhood program.
Secondly, the research could be extended to several simultaneous studies across a variety of contexts. The current study focused on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School Network, Papulankutja Campus Early Childhood students. The study could be expanded to include Kiwirrkurra Campus Early Childhood students as this classroom piloted Montessori pedagogy in 2012. Research could be extended to other Montessori pedagogy programs in Indigenous programs in Australia. For example (a) Torres Strait Islands: Thursday Island, Badu, Kubin, Boigu, Iama, Poruma and Erub (b) Aurukun, Cape York, (c) Lockhart River, Cape York, (d) Redfern, New South Wales, and (e) Armidale, New South Wales. The future research possibility could lead to greater capacity for generalisation and cross-context comparison.

7.7 PERSONAL IMPACT

The motivation for this research stemmed from the researcher’s involvement and passion in remote Aboriginal education in two of the most remote communities in Australia. The researcher was concerned about the quality of education being provided to Aboriginal students in these remote contexts. She feels that the findings from this study suggest that Montessori pedagogy has the potential to provide a more culturally relevant teaching and learning practice for remote Aboriginal Early Childhood students. The researcher believes that Montessori pedagogy provides a practice where the classroom teacher and AIEOs can work together in the learning environment. Montessori pedagogy accepts the “histories, culture, languages, traditional, child-rearing practices and lifestyle choices” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13) of the Ngaanyatjarra families. Montessori pedagogy allowed the researcher to build relationships with AIEOs, parents and the wider community that are friendships for life. In fact, Montessori pedagogy was the vehicle for providing the initial connection. From her studies, the researcher believes that the Montessori classroom is a unique teaching and learning environment as the space belongs to the students and not to the teacher. The teacher only prepares the environment. The parents, caregivers, wider community and AIEOs feel safe and secure entering the learning environment because the children have ownership, not the teacher. The researcher took the initiative to undertake her own research into Montessori pedagogy. From this research, she has confirmed her passion in Aboriginal education specifically, Early Childhood education students and Montessori pedagogy. Since the completion of the research, she has travelled to Italy to complete the Association
Montessori Internationale (AMI) Primary Diploma and has been exposed to a method of education that supports Indigenous students’ culture and their natural development.