A TARP, A TROOPIE & A TEDDY BEAR

Fostering Early Literacy Practices in Targeted Remote Aboriginal Communities in Central Australia

by

Melodie Merle Bat
Bachelor of Commerce
Diploma in Education
Postgraduate Diploma in Linguistics

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THESIS DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Master by research of the Charles Darwin University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Signed: ...........................................................................................................
Date:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And now…. I reckon!
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1. ‘Targeting Early Literacy – Family and School’ Project Report
ABSTRACT

In 1998/99 the Northern Territory Department of Education ran a project in its southern region called “Targeting Early Literacy – Family and School”. The aim of the project was to foster early literacy practices and to research these practices within the school-based programs and within families.

Melodie Bat was the sole project officer for that project which she implemented in three Aboriginal communities near Alice Springs.

This thesis is the evaluation, analysis and reporting of the research conducted during that project.

The project was implemented in response to the expressed needs of communities for preschool programs and as an investigation into ways to combat low literacy levels in schools. Communities wanted preschool programs; schools wanted help with their ‘Little Kids’ programs; and the system was looking for solutions.

This research was aimed at meeting these needs by taking an action research approach and by documenting the processes and products of the project.

It is written according to a practical framework and reflecting the initial parameters of the project. It is a work looking for directions and good ideas which promise to generalise to other remote communities in other parts of northern Australia.

This work is topical. There is currently a new early childhood framework being developed for the Northern Territory; the Federal Education Union is conducting a preschool inquiry and a mobile preschool program is just being established in a remote community in central Australia.

This thesis is a journey along a dusty road with a troop carrier full of books and toys and a teddy bear in the driver’s seat.

Enjoy the ride.
Melodie Bat
CHAPTER ONE

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM
CHAPTER 1: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

Where did this research come from?

In 1997 a call went out to schools for submissions for two-year projects to run in schools south.\(^1\) Two strong proposals were received. One proposal focused on early intervention in the remote area indigenous Early Childhood classroom and was put up by Noeline Laurie and Nan Whitmore. The second proposal focused on a ‘parents as teachers out bush’ role and was proposed by Mike Ellis, Lisa Paddison and myself. Both proposals were considered to have strong merit and so were put together to form a project, ‘Targeting Early Literacy – Family and School’. The project was strongly supported and advocated by the then Assistant Secretary Wes Whitmore who saw the need for some focused research in this area. The project ran in 1998 and 1999 and was aimed at assisting the participating communities and schools and at gathering information and data relating to early literacy practices in remote central Australian indigenous communities.

The official objectives of the project were to:

1. Improve, by the end of Year 3, the literacy outcomes of participant students and children in targeted Aboriginal communities.
2. Work collaboratively with and support teachers in the implementation of educational best practice in the context of the teaching of early literacy.
3. Assist parents in a range of effective early/emergent literacy activities for their children in the nought to four years range.
4. Work collaboratively with parents fostering understandings of the purpose and advantages of providing early/emergent literacy activities for young children who are below school age and those in the first years of school.
5. Collaboratively develop, implement and evaluate programs which provide professional support both to teachers and parents in the area of early/emergent literacy.
6. Assist the collection of data related to the objectives of the project.
7. Support School Support Services in the team provision of an effective support service to schools, parents and communities.

\(^1\) The Southern region of the Northern Territory Department of Education
Within this project, as the project officer, I decided to conduct research around early/emergent literacy activities, understandings and programs with those families who agreed to participate. This effectively meant that while the project was aimed to achieve all seven objectives, I only gathered data to research numbers three, four, five and six. All together, nine staff from different organisations, 23 parents and 48 children below the age of five participated in this project. Most families of the children in the three different communities agreed to participate in the research and data discussed here relates to these families.

As both the project officer and researcher, I took on the role of participant observer and used an action research approach.

**Who am I?**

I am a 38-year-old, non-indigenous woman who was born and raised in country Queensland. I have a teenage son and a baby daughter and my partner is also from Queensland. My teaching qualifications are originally in secondary teaching, including ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching and I have post graduate qualifications in linguistics. I came to work in the Northern Territory in 1994 as the junior class teacher at N’taria. From there I moved to Utju (Areyonga) where I spent three years teaching and working as the teacher-linguist coordinating the Pitjantjatjara and ESL programs. A move into Alice Springs saw me work as the manager of the remote schools support unit and then take up the two-year project that forms the basis of this research. Since then I have worked within the Indigenous Education Division of the Northern Territory Department of Education as the manager of Early Childhood programs, as the principal-teacher of Amoonguna school and as a lecturer within the School of Education Studies at Batchelor Institute. I am currently at home as the primary carer of our new baby daughter.

My first language is English. My Pitjantjatjara is lousy. My connections in Central Australia are primarily with the Pitjantjatjara people from Utju who welcome us as family. It is from these people that I have learnt most of what I know about indigenous Central Australia and to them that I owe acknowledgement for their personal and professional generosity. I live in Arrernte country and acknowledge these people as the traditional owners of the land where I am living, working and
raising my family. I have also worked with Arrernte people and acknowledge them for their help and teaching in both my life and my work.

For me, this research has been a way to strengthen my knowledge about early literacy and about indigenous ways of learning and it has also been a way to develop my skills of research and analysis. I also see it as a way of presenting some of these issues in a more academic framework so that the communities may benefit as the focus of planning and funding shifts more towards the education needs of small children and their families in remote Central Australia.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Literacy levels in the Northern Territory

There is strong evidence that indigenous students, especially remote area students in the Northern Territory, are not achieving very high literacy levels.

In 1998 in the Northern Territory, out of all the non-urban, indigenous ESL students, only 2% achieved the national reading benchmark in Year Three and 3% in Year Five (NTDE 1999). While there is criticism of the mechanism used to collect this data – MAP tests – and participation rates of non-urban indigenous students are lower than for any other sector, these results are still astonishing.

Not only is this of great concern to parents, families and communities but the reasons for this situation and the ways to change it is something that is continually discussed by teachers and teaching staff of schools, by education management, by academics and by parents and communities.

Reasons for this situation

There is a growing body of research into this situation and various government policies, frameworks and projects have been developed to address this problem. In the search for answers there have been much discussion and explanations offered.

In this search for a ‘solution’ different reasons have been proposed for these low literacy levels. I have separated the reasons into the four broad areas of:

- Historical and social
- The nature of the home/community environment
• The children at school
• The school system

It is not my intention to ‘solve’ this problem, but rather to present an overview of some of the factors generally considered to be contributing to this complex situation. It is my intention to give a general gloss of the factors in order to develop a general understanding of the framework of the problem presented here. Some of these issues, such as home/school disconnections, are discussed more fully in Chapter 2. In choosing which previous work to draw on I have concentrated on the work of Guider (1991), Dunn (1999) and NTDE (1999) as I found that these three authors reflected more the conversations and meetings I have been involved in with educators, schools and communities over the years about the learning needs of the children and the system’s apparent failure to meet these needs.

**Historical and social**

It is important to remember that the whole concept of literacy itself is only a relatively recent phenomenon here in the centre.

> Aboriginal people in Central Australia have made the transition from an oral culture to a growing literate tradition in both English and the Aboriginal Vernaculars only relatively recently in comparison to the centuries of literate tradition that underpin mainstream Australian culture…also, … education for all Aboriginal people only began to be implemented systematically in the mid 1960s.
> (Curriculum Development Unit, IAD, 1997)

Added to this is the struggle of indigenous people to survive within the broader Australian society. In Central Australia I have spoken with older people who can still remember being a child during the ‘killing times’. The impact of the violence and social displacement impacted upon indigenous people cannot be underestimated.

**The nature of the home/community environment**

• Socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, over-crowded, unhygienic living conditions and poor quality housing create a social situation where education is ineffective.
• Parent education levels. It is often stated by educators that the parents are not preparing their students well enough for school, nor supporting their schooling. Dunn (1997) presents this as ‘values’ and asserts that this is a major factor on the learning of the students – because the parents do not value literacy then the students do not value literacy and so do not learn. While I have valued the work of Dunn I do not agree with this finding of hers – it is my assertion that it is more the lack of knowledge of parents about how to approach and support the learning of the children rather than their valuing of literacy as a tool. This whole area of parents and parent education programs is explored further in Chapter 2.

The children at school

• Health. The children are suffering from ill-health and/or hearing loss and this impacts on their learning. The interconnectedness of health and education issues is explored further in Chapter 2 (Tsey 1997; Boughton 2000).

• Poor school attendance. If the children aren’t there, then they can’t learn. The erratic attendance patterns also impact on the delivery of teaching/learning programs. In my own experience it is possible to have a classroom of completely different children on different days of the same week. It takes an experienced teacher to maximise the learning of the children in this situation. Some children regularly attend school for only two days per week. I have chosen not to explore the impact of this factor in this work as I did not feel that the programs were well established enough to be able to support such an investigation.

• Cultural disconnection. The culture of home and the culture of school are so different from each other that it is almost impossible for the students to achieve in the school environment. The impact of this disconnection and the implications for the education system and the teaching approaches has been researched and will be discussed further. (Cummins 1986. Hill, Comber, Rivalland & Reid 1998)

• Language. The indigenous students who speak their own indigenous language as their first language when they start school are ‘behind’ their counterparts in ‘mainstream’ Australia because it’s very difficult to learn in another language. More specifically, in relation to Language learning difficulties, the analysis from “Learning Lessons” is as follows (NTDE 1999 p.29).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIRECT</th>
<th>PROXIMATE</th>
<th>DISTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

• Language learning difficulties
• English as a second or foreign language
• Poor health especially hearing impairment
• Minimal exposure to Standard Australian English (SAE) and structure numeracy
• Inadequate grounding in oral SAE
• Ad hoc access to ESL/EFL programs
• Few sites other than the school for literacy/numeracy tuition or reading opportunities
• Inherent difficulty of English

The point that is made concerning the children’s English being learnt as a foreign rather than as a second language needs explanation. When someone is learning a language as a second language that language is present around them in a social context and is spoken throughout the community. Thus if I were to be learning French while living in Paris, I would be learning French as a second language. However, if I take French lessons while living in Alice Springs, I am learning French as a foreign language – I have to actively seek out the learning, the language is not spoken around me. This is the learning situation for the children in remote Central Australia – normal home and community life is conducted in the children’s first language/s which is usually not English, the only English heard and used is usually only at school. Sometimes English is used at the shop but this is very context specific and more often than not ritualised communication.

The question of whether children who speak a language other than English as their first language can develop emergent literacy behaviours when all the literacy materials they have are in English is one of the keystones of this work.

The school system
• The school is operating a deficit model of education where the children are seen as lacking something that needs ‘fixing’. Dunn (1997) in particular explores this issue in her work, concluding that this is a major factor in the lack of achievement of students in schools. This factor came to play more in the design of the work than in the data collected. Knowing that this is a possibility I sought
rather to work to ensure that this did not occur. Having said that, I am not convinced that I was entirely successful and my diary notes and reflections show my concerns on this issue. This factor is more fully explored in the section on parent education programs in Chapter 2.

- Failure of the school curriculum. The curriculum itself is not catering to the education needs or learning styles of the students. Part of this work was the investigation of just what were the learning styles of the children. What is the most suitable curriculum? As a teacher I am always focused on the practical application of knowledge in my own work and so I have presented here a large amount of practical and immediately useful and applicable knowledge.

- Failure of the teachers. It could be said that the primarily non-indigenous teachers do not know how to teach indigenous students and this is the reason that the students are not achieving. The Northern Territory Department of Education (NTDE) and the Northern Territory University (NTU) worked together in 1997/98 to develop a course specifically to address this issue – a course for teachers in remote schools to develop skills specifically targeted to their situation. The Graduate Certificate in Remote ESL Teaching has been one attempt to meet the professional needs of teachers out bush. Various other professional development programs have been offered over the years but their effectiveness is itself affected by the high turnover rate.

Most recently in Alice Springs, a mini-audit of remote schools and the teachers responsible for the Early Childhood programs highlighted the fact that teachers without appropriate training are delivering programs. (Kasmira 2002) In this report, it is stated that in the eighteen remote schools surveyed, a total of 1041 students were classed as Early Childhood, defined as being aged three to eight years old. Out of all the teachers, only three had early childhood teaching qualifications and one of those had no experience other than remote teaching, that being her first posting. While all schools stated that teachers and teaching teams developed the program that caters to these children, half reported that the younger children were taught by Assistant Teachers and Part-time Instructors, most of whom had had no training at all.

- Attrition. The high teacher turnover is influenced by working and employment conditions. This turnover impacts greatly on the school teaching/learning programs. I have not addressed this factor at all in this work except to say that my diary notes reflecting on my own experience give insight into the difficulties
experienced as a non-indigenous worker in this field and that bush work is very hard work and it is not surprising that non-local teachers choose to only stay for relatively short periods of time.

- Accountability. Lack of it due to distance. Again this is not a factor that I have addressed. This is because I found that in my own work I was completely accountable on many different levels for the work that I was doing and for the way I went about it.

- Fragmented approaches. With high teacher turnover, a large number of inexperienced teaching staff and with a sometimes panicked approach to ‘fixing the problem’ many different approaches have been tried and trialled with varying amounts of success. Then a teacher leaves and a new one starts from the beginning again. One solution suggested by Learning Lessons (NTDE 1999) was to develop a more generic teaching program that ensured continuity for the students. Many have argued against this. It is not my intention to explore this issue further here.

**Strategies and policies**

If those factors discussed in the previous section are the factors that contribute to failure, just what contributes to success?

In 1996 the results of the National School English Literacy Survey were published. Several factors were identified that are associated with literacy achievement, including student enjoyment of reading, use of the library, which school you went to, the completion of homework every day and the use of computers in the classroom. It was found that students who fitted this profile achieved higher literacy levels than their counterparts. It was also found that typically, for indigenous students English was rarely or never spoken at home, the students were absent from school, they read less often outside school, and considerably fewer students did homework. They presented that these factors correlated with poor achievement at school (ACER 1996).

In my reading on this area I have found that much of the literature centres on teaching and learning styles and proposes methods for introducing students to the ‘culture of literacy’. Although it is internationally agreed that home literacy practices will affect the achievement of students and that students need to be prepared for the
social discourse of school, there has been very little done to work with families in this area in Central Australian communities. Schools are encouraged to ‘create bridges’ to home, to invite parents into their programs, to develop participation and partnerships. (NTDE 1994) All this is from a ‘system back’ approach rather than from the ‘family up’ where the focus on funding and programs is the school rather than the community where the communication is sent home from the school rather than a dialogue between the school and the community.

More specifically, various governments and departments have attempted to address this issue through the development of policy. It is not my intention here to explore the historical development of policy in this area but rather to present a snapshot of the current policies. They are as follows.

**Federal**

Australia has a national policy on Indigenous Education adopted in 1989 – the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) has 21 main goals all of which have been endorsed by the federal and all state governments. There are two main vehicles of funding through targeted programs to the states and territories. The first is IESIP (Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program) and the second is NIELNS (National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy) which was launched in March 2000. While IESIP programs have been around for some time, the federal government developed the NIELNS specifically in order to address the low literacy levels of indigenous students throughout the country. Contained within that strategy is a key element of ‘preschooling experiences’ that acknowledges that the poor achievements of indigenous students in relation to the Year Three benchmarks can be linked to low participation rates in preschools. The objective then is to increase the proportion of indigenous three to five year olds who access preschool education and to get these students ready for school and to extend successful preschool teaching practices.

As a way of collecting base-line data in order to better inform statistics on literacy levels of the indigenous population of Australia, the Indigenous Education Branch of the Australian Government, developed an instrument called the ‘Preschool Profile’ in 2001. This profile will be implemented across the country and be used in the year preceding the first compulsory year of school. This profile is discussed in the
assessment section of Chapter 2. This profile was developed by a working party of indigenous and non-indigenous Early Childhood educators from across the country and in consultation with the major Early Childhood professional organisations. Although it was not available at the time of research it does provide a good summary of the collective decision of some of the major early childhood professionals in the country as to what types of behaviours indicate literacy development in young indigenous children.

**Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory in the year 2000 developed a strategic plan to address the specific schooling needs of the indigenous community. This plan, the ‘Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2000 – 2004’ was developed by the then newly created Indigenous Education Branch of the NTDE and was informed by the then ‘Learning Lessons Implementation Team’ and was devised as a way to summarise the implementation factors in a positive way. It also provided a framework in which to write cabinet submissions for projects that were being developed to address these issues and as a way of aligning NT policy with federal policy and funding guidelines especially the commonwealth funded projects associated with the NIELNS and the IESIP programs.

The six main elements of that plan are:

1. Students go to school regularly.
2. Students are fit and able to learn.
3. Students have good schooling.
4. Students are tracked and their educational outcomes measured.
5. The Program is managed with full accountability.
6. Indigenous families and communities share responsibility with schools and government for educational outcomes.

This plan includes the maximisation of enrolment, attendance and participation of indigenous students at preschools. It was developed in response to the *Learning Lessons* review and constructed to meet national strategies.

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2 This knowledge comes from my own work as a manager within the IEB.
Indigenous early childhood education in the Northern Territory

In 1964 the Watts-Gallacher report was published. This report was ‘An investigation into the curriculum and teaching methods used in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory’ (Watts & Gallacher 1964) and was conducted by B.H.Watts, lecturer in Education with the University of Queensland and J.D. Gallacher, Inspector of schools, welfare branch, Northern Territory Administration. Among the recommendations of that report were:

- that pre-schools be established as soon as possible on all settlements and missions;
- that action research programmes be instituted in Aboriginal pre-schools with a view to evolving programmes appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal pre-school children;
- that use be made for the present of available buildings for pre-schools (Watts & Gallacher 1964 p.210).

Since then there is a common story in the Territory that seems to run like this ‘We used to have a preschool in the 1970s but it got taken away in the 1980s’. I have heard this story often generally but specifically at two schools that I have worked in, Areyonga and Amoonguna. Communities themselves, as a defined infrastructure and containing an educational infrastructure, are relatively new to Central Australia, with some of the settled communities only existing since the 1960s. Grandparents of some of the children did not have access to ‘formal education’.

In the 1990s there was a move towards the development of childcare facilities in the Northern Territory. Batchelor College, from its Early Childhood Unit, ran a three-year project ‘Talking Early Childhood’ funded through the Van Leer foundation and resulting in the production of different resources.³ This work by Batchelor has been intended to both inform their childcare courses as to the needs of their client group of students and to provide a resource for educators and service groups running childcare and playgroup programs for indigenous children in the Northern Territory. Batchelor continues to work with innovative childcare programs in the Northern Territory, providing training for workers and support for programs.

³ ‘Talking Early Childhood – A Profile of Services and Programs for Young Aboriginal Children Living in Remote Communities in the Northern Territory, Talking Early Childhood (video), Growing Up with Culture Strong (video), 98/99 Kids’ Stuff Calendar – Looking Through the Windows of Play and Talking Early Childhood – a Resource Book.'
The *Learning Lessons* report identified 104 preschool education programs in the Northern Territory, 54 of which are in indigenous communities. It is highlighted in this report that due to the NT’s preschool policy, it is very difficult to start a preschool and usually ‘if a school does not already have a preschool, children will miss out altogether.’ (NTDE 1999, p.98)

In a perhaps eerie echo of the Watts-Gallacher report, “*Learning Lessons*” in regards to Early Childhood education recommends among others that:

- within a period of five years, there be guaranteed access to play centres and preschools for all children in the three to five year age group (recommendation 84)

- mobile preschools and playgroups are considered as interim solutions to ensure guaranteed access for all children to structured early childhood education (recommendation 82)

(NTDE 1999, p.99)

Obviously, then, between 1964 and 1999 the recommendations of the Watts-Gallacher report have not fully been implemented. Just how the advent of preschools has waxed and waned in the Territory is not the focus of this research but would present an interesting historical journey to the present. In this research I have simply accepted the non-existence of preschools in the targeted communities as fact rather than as consequence of policy changes.

Into this developing education system has come the establishment of small ‘programs for little kids’ that are attached to schools in small communities and are basically unofficial preschool programs. They are often developed on an ‘ad hoc’ basis, depending on the current principal and whether or not there are local workers available.

*Needs analysis within the Northern Territory*

A lot of work has been done to investigate what indigenous communities say they want, both in the larger, big picture policy areas as well as in the smaller hands-on program areas. However, not a lot has been written down and published in order to inform other programs. The “*Learning Lessons*” review is one source of information. Another is the project work “*Talking Early Childhood*”, done in the field of
childcare in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory by Batchelor College (1995/1&2). This report concludes that

Aboriginal women on remote communities are increasingly looking for alternative forms of childcare and additional forms of children’s services. Yet at the same time women are strongly affirming that the identity of the child as an Aboriginal person must be upheld (Batchelor College Early Childhood Unit 1995/2 p.149).

They conclude that new centres must be developed in consultation with communities so that the centres reflect and uphold the very culture of the people they service.

**Programs**

What is currently on offer regarding Early Childhood programs within NT schools? At the time of this research in the Northern Territory, schooling officially began at five years of age when a child started ‘transition’. Children could however have attended preschool which was offered for four-year-olds. In remote communities, in recognition that no other services may have been available, a child may have started preschool at aged three. However, the three-year-olds were not included in the official statistics for the school as far as enrolments and attendance were concerned and a school could not use the three-year-old numbers to justify the creation of an official preschool program. In order to begin the process of requesting an official preschool program, a community must have had a minimum of 12 four-year-olds at which point the school would have been allocated a 0.5 teacher. The reality of this is that it was difficult to attract a teacher to a community to work part-time, there was usually no extra housing and so this allocation was subsumed into the general teacher allocation and the preschool became part of the whole early childhood class (NTDE 1999).

Another way that schools have attempted to cater to the younger children is through a commonwealth funded IESIP (Indigenous Education Strategic Initiative Program) initiative specifically targeting three to five-year-old indigenous students. Although some of the guidelines have changed in the past three years, this is the same program that was running at the time of this project.

The Indigenous Education Division website of the NTDE lists the following.
What Are Early Childhood Programs for Indigenous Students (three to five-year olds)?

These Programs are locally identified programs that schools have developed. They are made available through IESIP funding, must be applied for and must target improved outcomes in:
- Enrolment and attendance
- Literacy competency for entry into Year One
- Numeracy competency for entry into Year One
- Student health/hearing
- The involvement of indigenous people in the education of their three to five-year-olds

How Long Do They Operate For?

These programs may
- Run for six or twelve months.
- If an application is successful in gaining funding for twelve months, money is provided over two instalments. The second instalment is dependent on term progress reports that clearly demonstrate increases in outcomes as identified in the original application.

As previously noted, the funding, provided by DEST, the Commonwealth Department of Education, aligns with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP).

In small communities in Central Australia there are often no other programs for children aged from birth to five years old such as childcare or playgroup other than a program that may be developed using this funding and that program officially caters to the three to five-year-olds which effectively cuts out the birth to three-year-olds altogether.

At the time of research only one community in Central Australia was large enough to support an accredited childcare centre (Yuendumu). There is currently more work being done to try and set up childcare programs in smaller communities in Central Australia. The reality in Central Australia is that the only programs available to small children and their families are the ‘little kids programs’ that are attached to schools and funded through the education department and are often run on an ad hoc basis by untrained staff (Kasmira 2002).
Current trends
In the Northern Territory, as elsewhere in the country and overseas, there is a shift in Early Childhood education towards a multi-mode, needs-based approach.

"Learning Lessons" recommends that joint funding arrangements with the Northern Territory Department of Health and Childrens’ Services, DETYA and the Federal Department of Family and Children’s Services be established. It talks of mobile preschools and playgroups, libraries, childcare facilities – and toddlers!

This multi-mode approach is also highlighted in the ‘Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’ (OECD) country note for Australia that lists a number of different modes of delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care, or ECEC, and this report covers children from birth to compulsory school age and includes the transition period into schooling. The OECD report notes that ‘Territory Health and the Northern Territory Department of Education are currently collaborating to establish a whole of government approach to the development and implementation of early childhood policy’ (OECD 2001, p.28).

As previously discussed, some needs analysis has been done on the communities’ need for childcare. Some other work was done in South Australia along the same lines. A children’s services review was held and six Aboriginal Communities were asked what they wanted for their children and how children’s services could help. Their findings were that children services were perceived as having the potential to strengthen the child and his or her family provided that ‘Aboriginal environments’ which include the employment of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal resources are developed (Glover, 1994, p13).

It was also found that ‘helping children move into the formal school system is seen as a vital function of Early Childhood Services’ (Glover, 1994, p13).

This review discussed the fact that ‘different choices are being made regarding the balance between maintaining an Aboriginal identity and participating in the broader non-Aboriginal society’ (Glover, 1994, pp.5-6).
While the paper notes that ‘most services began in the 1960s and were shaped by the compensatory education approach’ (Glover, 1994. p13), the researchers found that in the six communities, that rather than wanting the system to take over their parenting roles, the most commonly talked about functions of children’s services were:

- supplementing family care
- providing opportunities for children's socialisation
- preparing children for their future education

There is currently in the Northern Territory, a multi-agency taskforce developing a children’s policy framework. Submissions presented to the taskforce include a recommendation to

establish and maintain existing innovative and flexible responses in remote areas and smaller centres to ensure children and families receive support, information and services eg mobile libraries, playgroups and pre-schools (Department of Health and Children’s Services 2002, p.3).

This policy is intended to be multi-agency across the whole of the territory and be a ‘Vision for Territory children from conception to about 12 years of age. The project is jointly sponsored by the NT Departments of Health and Community Services and Employment, Education and Training.’(Alice Springs focus group discussion notes, 20 March 2002, p.1)

It is clear then that there is a national, territory and localised acknowledgement of the priority of establishing appropriate early childhood education and programs. However, the elements and goals of such programs seem to change depending on the angle from which you approach.

The federal and territory governments are focused on literacy and numeracy levels and preparedness for school. Nationally, the ‘preschool profile’ (DETYA 2000) and its accompanying parent information booklets highlight this with the three focus areas being literacy, numeracy and ‘social skills’.

In *Learning Lessons* the importance of the early years to lay the foundation for future learning is emphasised. It is stressed that these programs are essential for the preparation of young indigenous children to begin school and it is important that this
pre-learning be explicit in such preparation. Such preparation should be not only in the culture of school but include developmental learning in literacy and numeracy. ‘The review regards the availability of forms of pre-literacy exposure as fundamental to the success of future reforms’ (NTDE 1999, p.99).

These curricula and programs are designed to meet the literacy needs of children entering school with no exposure to literacy. What of the needs of the children from non-literacy based communities before the commencement of formal schooling? This is the focus of the research presented here.

**Life in remote communities in Central Australia**

The following is presented only as a context-building snapshot not as a total description of life on a community in Central Australia. In order to preserve the anonymity of the communities which participated in this study I have only been able to provide a generalised description. However, these descriptions do relate to each of the three communities.

**Family life**

In these communities, life is a rich web of social interactions between members of the extended families. There are obligations placed on people by their place in the kinship system and these and the obligations of land, lore and law are all very important. They are the very fabric of everyone’s world. There is a constant flow of people travelling through, visiting, going to town, going hunting. Most income is derived from CDEP (Community Development Employment Program), working in the clinic, school or office, or from welfare.

**Culture**

How people live their lives and everything they do is part of their culture – this is seemingly becoming more and more a blend of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ Aboriginal cultures. In all three sites, women still go out and collect bush tucker, kill perenties or goannas, find honey ants, witchetty grubs and a host of other hard-work delicacies. Men still go hunting for kangaroos. Now it’s done with a car and a gun. Ceremonies still take place. There are rules for living and breaking those rules has consequences. And the children are always part of everything that is going on.
Health
People are generally unwell. Most children suffer from Otitis Media and consequent hearing loss. Many have head lice and scabies which become infected. They suffer from regular bouts of pneumonia and a number of different gastric problems. Many children are born underweight and suffer from ‘failure to thrive’. The Health Centre is a very important place for the community with most people regularly attending.

Education
The school is the centre for education and has a clear role to play. Older children either go away to school, do some kind of secondary program at the school, or simply finish school altogether. Most schools teach in English only with the local Aboriginal Assistant Teachers translating for the children as they teach. In some communities local teachers are now qualified teachers and others are studying but there is still a majority of non-local non-indigenous teachers working in the schools.

Violence
There is at times a lot of violence in the community – some of it is all shouting and no violence and is the right way of addressing some issues. Other times, as the result of alcohol, cannabis or substance abuse (e.g. petrol sniffing) there is violence. Alcohol tends to make everything louder, angrier and more violent and things get out of control.

Dysfunction
In Central Australia there are often times when the community itself does not function smoothly. At times, there will be incidents such as vandalism and the shop may shut its door, or the health centre will have to close. Usually a meeting is called and things are sorted out that way. Sometimes physical things break down and the community may find itself without power or water. These days are hard – especially when it is 42°C and there are no air conditioners working and the water hole is dry. Being remote means that parts and expertise are often a long way away.

Disempowerment
There are many sad stories in the communities of Central Australia – of children stolen, waterholes poisoned, and people shot. These stories are still in living memory. People also remember a time when the land was clearly theirs. Now, it is
easier to get food and shelter but it comes at the price of staying in the one place and living a life determined by another more dominant culture. All this has taken its toll and many people do not seem to have the spirit left to live this new life, to stand in the dust storm. Many lie down and cannot get up again. This disempowerment can be seen throughout these three communities and with their family members who come to live in Alice Springs – people who get ‘lost’ for a while – or forever - in alcohol or drugs or violence.

Predictions for the future
There has been some strong talk in Central Australia over the past few years. A lot of people are moving into Alice Springs where they can access services more easily and find better employment and educational opportunities. Some are coming for the grog. This urban shift has planners and governments busy. There is talk of predicted major social unrest and the failure of the education and health systems. There is a general consensus that the time for talking and planning is past and programs must be put in place now if they are to have any effect.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY
Statement of the problem situation
Schools are run on a particular cultural, bureaucratic and literacy-based model of education. Small Aboriginal children in Central Australia are educated by their families before school in many important areas. These two different models of education intersect very dramatically as the child enters school.

There are certain social and literate behaviours and knowledge that the children are presumed to have when they start school and the whole curriculum relies on this. In most central Australian communities the children have very little if any exposure to literacy or school-type behaviour before they commence school. These behaviours and knowledge are vital to the successful school learning of the children.

Most of the schools in Central Australia run English-only programs and all literacy material in the community is in English. The local indigenous language is usually either not written down in published form, or not written.
The children can often speak and understand a number of different languages. They usually only begin to learn English when they start school.

How then can a program both prepare the children for the culture of school while maintaining the child’s own cultural identity? How can a child develop emergent literacy in a language they do not speak?

If a school were to run a ‘before school program’ aimed at birth to five-year-old children and their carers, what would these programs look like? What would be their aims? What are the elements that make them successful? What does ‘successful’ mean?

**Aims of this research**

There are two main aims of this study:

1. To inform the communities and schools of Central Australia, the Education Departments of the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth, and the various childcare agencies and organisations of the elements of ‘before school’ programs so that more informed and targeted planning can occur.

2. To investigate and foster the emergent literacy behaviours in birth to five-year-old children in Central Australian Indigenous communities.

**The Research**

Given that literacy in English is a goal that is sought by indigenous people in Central Australia (NTDE 1999) and given that emergent literacy skills and the ability to engage in ‘school discourse’ on entry are advantages in this process (Hill et al 1998), what are the elements of a successful before school program in a remote indigenous community in Central Australia? What does emergent literacy look like in this context and how can it be fostered?

Specifically, this project will address the following questions:

(a) Can children whose first language is not a literacy-based language, develop emergent literacies when all reading materials are in English?

(b) What does this look like?

(c) What are some of the ways the children like to learn?
(d) What factors might contribute to literacy acquisition in these types of communities?

(e) What strategies did we use? What worked?

(f) How can you assess the ‘preparedness for school’ and early/emergent literacy development in participant children?

(g) What are the elements of successful ‘before school’ programs in Central Australia that are attached to schools?

(h) What does ‘successful’ mean?

(i) What do some of these programs look like?

Importance of the study

Literacy levels in remote communities in Central Australia have been documented as well below the national average. The connection between literacy levels, health and mortality rates have been established by many different studies and most recently cited by the Australian Medical Association in their ‘report card on indigenous health’ – *No more excuses*. (2002).

In the past decade, the Commonwealth Government has invested considerable funding in the running of programs aimed at three to five-year-old indigenous children in Northern Territory schools. Territory Health, the Northern Territory Department of Education and the Commonwealth Department of Children’s Services all run programs targeting this particular age group and the birth to three-year-olds as well. The issue of who is responsible for the funding and support for education and care of the little ones in small communities has been hotly debated across the sectors for many years. This study aims to bring one perspective to this discussion.

The recent study of ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC) programs in Australia by the OECD highlighted the need for the development of needs-based programs and multi-funding models to be developed by the various agencies involved. However, very few examples that were not ‘prescribed by funding’ or ‘historically defined’ were given.

In the Northern Territory some research has been conducted into the need and types of children’s services for remote area communities but there has been no research into emergent literacy in remote communities in Central Australia at all.
Before school programs in Central Australia will have certain common elements that will be necessary for their successful establishment. Evidence and examples of emergent literacy behaviours by the children participating in these groups will provide useful information for providers of indigenous ECEC programs in remote Central Australia.

And so this research will provide not only sensible advice and practical ideas but hopefully generate some discussion and further thought and research in this area.

**Definition of terms**

Some terms used in this paper need definition as they are used differently in different contexts.

*Early Childhood* in this study means children aged from birth to eight years and the education programs catering to them.

A ‘Before School Program’ is one run for children aged from birth to five-year-olds and their carers. It is established by, managed and connected with the school. It is not necessarily sited at the school itself. It is not childcare and is more like a cross between a preschool program and a play group.

*ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care* encompasses both ‘schooling’ and ‘childcare’ programs and has been used by the OECD in their report into services in Australia. This review was intended to inform the goal of ‘improving access and quality in early childhood education, in partnership with families, so as to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning’ (OECD 2001, p.4). This review is targeted at policy makers.

*ECCD – Early Childhood Care and Development* encompasses programs for the whole family – health, education, community development etc and is primarily used in reference to programs undertaken by membership organisations of the ECCD Group which works in third world countries. (They have in the past funded programs in indigenous Australia.)

ECCD, by definition, is an holistic approach to early childhood and
includes integrating health, nutrition, and intellectual stimulation, providing the opportunities for exploration and active learning, as well as providing the social and emotional care and nurturing a child needs in order to realize her/his human potential and play an active role in their families and later in their communities (www.ecdgroup.com/aboutus.asp).

First Steps Tutor – this a teacher who has undergone training with a consultant from the First Steps Program and who is thereby qualified to teach in the methodologies and practices that make up the First Steps program. This program is an English literacy teaching and tracking program developed by the Education Department of Western Australia and widely implemented in Northern Territory schools.

Scope and limitations of the study

It is not my intention here to investigate the appropriateness or effectiveness of the current education system operating in Central Australia, or to answer the question of why literacy levels are so low in Central Australian indigenous communities. It is my assumption that children who are well-prepared for school, with early experiences and engagement with literacy will do better at school.

I am also assuming that I will be able to identify emergent literacy behaviour in children with whom I may not share a common language.

This study has been conducted in Central Australian schools, specifically in three sites within 250 kilometres of Alice Springs. This study, while perhaps being useful to inform discussions in other areas of the Northern Territory, may not be applicable to other situations.

This study is not aimed at childcare but at a situation where primary carers (mothers, fathers, grandmothers, aunties, sisters etc.) took responsibility for the care of the child.

While there is no doubt a need for numeracy development through ECEC programs, it was not the intention of my research to document such practices and I have gathered no data on numeracy.

OUTLINE OF THE REMAINDER OF THE THESIS
In this thesis, I will present an overview of the major theories in this field and their relationship to this work. I will present what we did in this project and what we found and then I will analyse these findings. Finally I will present some of my recommendations for consideration in this field.

In Chapter 2, I will present an overview of the major theories in this field and their relationship to this work. By providing this overview I intend to provide the broader context in which this work sits.

In Chapter 3, I will explore the methodologies that I used in this research – how I set up the project, how the different sites were selected, how I collected data and analysed it and finally restate the original hypothesis stated in Chapter 1. Also in this chapter I will present the methodological assumptions I have made and the limitations of this work and I will briefly explore the ethics and effects of research in an indigenous community.

In Chapter 4, I will present the considerations and factors that impacted on the development of an effective and appropriate assessment tool for use in this context.

In Chapter 5, I will give an outline of the research context, geographically, socially and in relation to literacy. I will then present the overall history of the project, the summary statistics and the detailed implementation of the literacy programs at the three sites. I will then examine several principles concerning literacy that arose from this research and present them within a learning model. Lastly I will present a brief overview of what we achieved in this project.

In Chapter 6, I will move to the findings of my work. After giving a more specific description of each community I will work from the original aims and objectives of the project through what we hoped to achieve to the reality of what actually happened. I will then take what I found and analyse it in terms of what we learned in relation to literacy, learning behaviours, assessment and program models. Finally I will discuss how to determine the effectiveness of this and other programs like it.
Lastly, in Chapter 7, I will summarise this work, giving my conclusions and recommendations. A final postscript on the three participant communities will end the thesis.

CHAPTER SUMMARY
In this chapter I have looked specifically at the problem, defining the research problem within the broader parameters of the historical and social context of indigenous education in Central Australia.

In the following chapter I will examine the major theories that have contributed to the underlying academic foundation of this work and review the associated literature.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In researching the theories and background information necessary to support and inform my work I found that it was difficult to find much at all that specifically related to this context. This lack of available research in the field of Early Literacy and Education in remote indigenous communities generally, and more specifically in Central Australia has been acknowledged most recently in the ‘OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy’ in both the Australian Background Report (Press and Hayes 2000) and in the ensuing Country Note (OECD 2001). As a researcher searching for materials and literature, this was in itself a rationale for the research undertaken. Having noted that, I have still found some very useful and thoughtful research in many of the areas covered in this research, namely:

- Literacy
- Aboriginal childhood socialisation patterns
- Health and education
- Disconnections between home and school

The literature presented in this Chapter contributes to both the formulation of my literacy program and its evaluation. It is into these broad themes that I have organised my review.

LITERACY

What is early and emergent literacy?

As literacy was the major focus of the project this was the first area that I concentrated on. Just what it means to become literate and how this happens were two questions that I considered. As a teacher I already had a good knowledge and understanding of the development of literacy in a school based system but knew that my knowledge was predicated on the children coming with certain knowledge and language skills. What about when the children have never read a book before, never held a pencil or crayon, cannot speak the language that the books are written in? What if our cultures are so different from each other that I am like a visitor from another country? It was not enough then that I understand the different theories of literacy development but that I contextualise this understanding to the children of these communities.
Interestingly, when researching this topic, I found the ‘pre-early literacy’ phase of literacy development to be quite a contentious area as it occurs right at that point where the child moves from home to school, from play to lessons, from family to system.

This point is made by Hill et al.

…the field of emergent literacy has always been a contested field. Linguists, early childhood educators, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists all contribute view points about emergent literacy. Emergent literacy occurs at the intersection between the home, the community and early schooling, and as such, it is a field which is intersected by a range of discourses, each with its own assumptions about the nature of childhood, family practice, physical and cognitive development and the nature of literacy. Because these assumptions are taken for granted, they are presented as self-evident truths within each discourse (Vol 2 1998 p.5).

To clarify the terms used here then:

**Emergent literacy** describes behaviours observed in young children who are still ‘playing to learn’ either at home or at preschool and are typically aged from birth to five-years-old. (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2000)

**Early literacy** is used to describe a child’s literacy development when the formal teaching of literacy begins – at school. (Hill et al Vol 2 1998)

In this work I have used the term *emergent literacy* to describe the behaviours I have observed rather than to encapsulate the whole emergent literacy development theory. I have also used the term *early literacy* to describe children’s general literacy development.

Historically, there have been a number of different approaches to the teaching of literacy and they can be grouped broadly into:

- Maturational
- Developmental
- Emergent
• Social-cultural
  (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2000; Tasmanian Office of Education 2003\textsuperscript{4})

I will address each of these concentrating on the emergent and social-cultural approaches as it is these approaches that are the most widely used today.

*Maturational*

This approach was prevalent until the 1960s. It was believed that children needed to be a certain age before they could learn to read and that through observation and testing teachers could assess the child’s biological readiness. It was thought that literacy learning began only when school began and that the home and parents had little influence. (Hill et al Vol 2 1998)

*Developmental*

This approach became popular in the 1960s and persevered until the mid-1980s. It was now believed that ‘readiness’ was developmental and could be enhanced through specific teaching programs. The role of parents was still limited and took the form of being involved in programs developed by the teachers rather than doing anything before school started. The teaching of reading was still the domain of the school. It was this approach that saw the rise of the basal reader as a tool for developing reading readiness and there was a focus on the skills of reading such as visual discrimination, sound/letter correspondence etc. (Hill et al Vol 2 1998; Tasmanian Education Office 2003)

*Emergent*

This is the approach that has been most prevalent in the preschools of Australia. Based on the work of Piaget, this approach emerged during the 1970s. The research done then suggested that reading was not a set of isolated skills but rather an ongoing process that began at birth. Literacy was seen to be a complex interaction of reading, writing and oral language that emerged over time. The role of the child changed from being acted upon to being the active participant in experiences designed to encourage the development of literacy. The shift occurred to whole language rather than the previous phonics based approach. This was also the era of ‘process writing’ where

\textsuperscript{4} See Appendix I.
children were encouraged to learn to write by writing. (Hill et al Vol 2 1998; Tasmanian Education Office 2003)

Now that literacy activities were ‘real life’ activities, parents were encouraged to provide experiences for their children that fostered their literacy development. This approach is still prevalent in Australian preschools today.

**Socio-cultural**

During the 1990s new approaches emerged that built on and refined the emergent literacy approaches. It was becoming recognised that literacy was not a separate skill that a child developed but rather cultural capital which has been defined as ‘knowledge and competence that can be converted into ‘status, wealth and mobility’ (Luke 1993, in Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2000, p.4).

Now the *purpose* of literacy became the focus rather than the *development* of literacy. It was recognised that there are different kinds of literacies which are used in different contexts (Cairney & Ruge 1997) and the literacy that is valued at home may not be the literacy that is valued at school. It was recognised that not only were literacy practices socially constructed but they were also determined by the culture they were developed in. Now we see the use of the terms ‘authentic texts’ and ‘making meaning’. Teachers were encouraged to make use of the experiences and knowledge that the child brought with them.

The resultant recognition of the mismatches between home and school, between social and cultural norms, gave rise to different approaches by teachers and schools in order to ‘bridge the gap’.

The development of the ‘critical literacy’ approach took this work one more step, acknowledging power imbalances and providing the mechanism to give children the tools to achieve a more critical approach in their reading, writing and thinking.

More and more, the focus is on the child as the centre of their world and their learning and the responsibility of the school to respond to the child’s world and literacy rather than make the child fit into the dominant literacy culture of the school.

**Literacy approaches in this context**
In my own work I have found that the emergent literacy approaches have provided a valuable mechanism for the assessment and measurement of literacy development whereas the socio-cultural theories provided more guidance in the teaching/learning process itself. This is the situation in most of the preschools in Australia at the moment. It is the emergent literacy approach that provides the information and measurement but it is the socio-cultural approaches that give teachers the tools to develop more appropriate curriculum and teaching tools.

This emergent literacy development has been written down into various charts of ages and stages with the intention of mapping the literacy achievement of children (Canizares 1995, p.38; Riedl et al.1995, p.7). This will be discussed further in the section on assessment.

In doing this project I was confronted with an interesting language/literacy dilemma. In relation to the beginning of the development of literacy, in relation to small children, all the literacy theories presume that children are developing their literacy behaviours in their first language and that this is a literate language. Nowhere have I been able to find research or readings where a similar situation to the one here has been found. The ESL research that I have read and used, the learning theories, all relate to school-aged children and schooling and are based on the approach that says you must be able to speak a language before you can learn to read and write in it.

However, the research and the theories are saying that literacy begins at birth and the home literacy culture is vital in the further development of a child’s literacy on entering the school system.

In two of the three sites in this research the first languages of the children are not written down – they are from an orate society. In the third site the children speak Aboriginal English as a first language. This is not the English of the literate world.

**Literacy assessment and measurement**

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5 English as a Second Language.
One of the greatest challenges I faced in doing this project was the assessment of the children’s literacy development. As with anything to do with early childhood education this is an area that is greatly debated. The question of whether small children should be assessed at all is at the heart of the issue. After consideration of both sides I decided that we would in fact need to develop a mechanism in order to either snapshot or track the development of literacy. More on this is presented in Chapter 3 under Assessment.

As a First Steps Tutor, I first went to use the “First Steps Developmental Continuum for Reading and Writing” but found that there were not enough small steps there to give us enough information.

Another developmental continuum was developed by the Federal Indigenous Education Branch as part of its National Preschool Profile. The literacy component of that profile is attached here as an appendix. Note that it has attempted to cater for the child’s first language and begins with behaviours that might be seen at home. Again, it is these ‘little steps’ that will be useful in later analysis.

It is at this point that the use of the work on emergent literacy becomes valuable.

**Those little steps**

After reading the theories and attempting to contextualise them to the situation I was working in, it became obvious to me that it was going to be in the ‘little steps’ that I would find my answers. And so I looked to the detail of the behaviours that were being described.

Dunn uses the term *emergent literacy* to ‘describe evidence of literate activity in children’ (1999, p.51). She points out, as did Canizares (1995) that in a literate society it is difficult to separate the development of language from the development of literacy because they are so interlinked. Thus, by using emergent literacy it is possible to look for certain behaviours to indicate the emergence of literate activity. For little children this entails such things as making sense of print, ‘reading’ a story book or reading stories at home.

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6 See Appendix II.
Dunn further identifies six broad areas of emergent literacy, based on the work of several others:

1. oral language competence
2. story knowledge
3. book handling knowledge
4. print knowledge
5. book reading knowledge
6. writing knowledge (Dunn 1999, p.50).

Fostering literacy development in an oral society
Dunn, like many others before her such as Reid (1977), DEETYA (1998), Hill et al. (1998), concluded that

It is clear that, no matter what the culture, those children with experience of books, stories and writing before they go to school, have less trouble learning to be literate than those who do not have that experience (1999, p.62).

Dunn’s work was the most closely relevant research that I could find and so provided a real benchmark for my work. I could accept then that it was a given that if the young children and families I was working with had literacy experiences then the children would ‘do better’ at school.

What happens then if you come from an orate society rather than a literate one? What is the impact on your literacy learning? How can this be addressed?

The research that I have found in this area all centres on compensating the children for the ‘lack of exposure to literacy’ when they reach school rather than looking at what happens before they begin school. Durre points out ‘..it cannot be assumed that children from non-literate societies will automatically make the leap from oral language to written language (Durre 1985, p.18).

Durre makes the point over and over that children need exposure to literature and a literacy-based environment before formally learning to read. However, Durre uses a values-based argument for reading rather than an empowerment or political argument, talking about ‘affection for books’ rather than the importance of reading in
a society based on literature. The writer asserts that teachers should ‘encourage and nurture affection for books’ (Durre 1985, p.18).

One way of inducting children into the ‘culture of literacy’ is by developing a literacy in their first language. Where schools are running bilingual programs, the child’s first language is the language of instruction in early childhood and there are many books in their language specifically developed within the community itself for the purpose of education. The children then move from literacy in their first language, through oracy in English to literacy in English. This introduces literacy in their first language. Handbooks for running preschools were published in the Northern Territory in the 1980s with one being specifically written for Aboriginal Preschools. Called Wangkami, this handbook was based on the preschool program developed by Jeannie Egan, a local indigenous Preschool teacher at Yuendumu School and was written specifically for Aboriginal Teachers to be able to run their own preschool program.

The program is based on collaboration between the school, parents and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers and encourages first language use in language rich activities especially for cognitive development. Yuendumu School is a bilingual school and the preschool is run entirely in Warlpiri.

Other ways of ‘dealing with this lack in the children’ have been developed.

Some approaches have been to ensure that the materials used are relevant and meaningful to the children. Books and magazines with photos of the children themselves and their families and communities have been found to be the most lasting and popular (Christie 1989; Durre 1985). It is proposed that using these types of books as a vehicle for introducing literacy enables the children to make the connection between home life and culture and this new culture of literacy.

Other strategies for helping students to make this connection include using kinship terms, names of classmates and having parents in the classroom (Walton 1987).

Some researchers have focused on the culture of literacy itself and the need to encourage children to develop a ‘love of books’ (Nicholls and Harris 1996; Durre...
1985). It is proposed that fostering such a relationship with books will help children enjoy reading and see books as something friendly and fun rather than just hard school work. Lap reading is a teaching strategy that has been suggested as an effective tool as it brings the children in close and creates a stronger relationship with books when the reading is done by a family member (Nicholls and Harris 1996; Walton 1987). Using negotiated texts is a similar strategy.

The suggestion by Nicholls and Harris that it is possible for students to gain technical literacy rather than becoming part of the ‘culture of literacy’ was something that I kept in my mind as I developed the project and implemented it. Children then could be ‘playing’ literacy and only doing it in the context of school rather than actually becoming literate. The tension between this and the possibility of creating an assimilationist program was one of the contrasts that kept the program in balance.

Dunn’s research found a significant link between literacy competencies at the end of the pre-school year and four years later. In searching for possible determinants of this, Dunn suggests that it is parental values in relation to literacy that make the difference. She states that

Aspects of parental values included modelling of positive values in relation to literacy activity, the amount of literacy knowledge that children arrived at school with and parental involvement in school (1997, p.245).

To improve Aboriginal children’s literacy learning, therefore, schools, teachers and universities must find ways of teaching literacy which involve parents in seeing the value of literacy activities in early childhood. This is also highlighted in a 1997 position paper prepared by the Curriculum Development Unit, IAD, the rationale behind the IAD adult vernacular literacy program and its benefits were discussed.

Another benefit of adult vernacular literacy in the community will be the expanded awareness of the importance of family literacy practices instead of seeing literacy as a skill acquired only in a classroom. Aboriginal adults will become more aware of the importance of home literacy practices, leading to a recognition that successful literacy acquisition in later years is highly dependent on Early Childhood practices.

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7 Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.
such as bedtime story reading, language games and modelling of reading/writing behaviour (p.3-4).

ABORIGINAL CHILDHOOD SOCIALISATION PATTERNS

Childrearing practices

Hamilton (1981) and later Kearins (1993), investigating the differences between white and Aboriginal Australian childrearing practices and the impact this has on school learning, suggest that there are some common elements to the way Aboriginal children in Australia grow up.

These include:

• Adults see babies as autonomous individuals. It is then the adults’ responsibility to respond to the expressed needs of the baby.
• Babies are treated with extreme indulgence and are given whatever they demand.
• Adults in general make no demands on the child. Children don’t have to obey requests/demands.
• The babies grow up right in the midst of the family and are a part of everything that is going on.
• By about the age of eighteen months to two years the child may move out of the mother's sight, although they are still monitored, privately. For these children, their peer group is everything.
• By three or four years their range from home has extended to half a kilometre or more.
• The children then mix together and will go together to go exploring.
• Aboriginal children have the freedom to experiment with developing skills without obvious verbal or physical restraint by adults.
• Children watch first to learn and then experiment by emulating. They ask very few questions.
• If children ask for food they're immediately given food or everyone looks for money to buy what they want.
• Children are not expected to do anything, nor are they praised for what they do, e.g. copying dancing.
• Toilet training is done through the child’s peer group and consists of avoiding places eg blankets rather than specifying one.
**Learning styles and environments**

Obviously then, how a child is raised will determine how they learn in the formal school environment.

Christie found that the Yolngu (Aboriginal) world is based on a network of family relationships, that people ‘gain their identity through extensive webs of connectedness, stretching back and forth across the land, linking disparate groups and entities’ (Christie 1992, p.4) and that the language abounds in names. He asserted that this will impact on the learning of Aboriginal children in western classrooms.

I have found in my work such an abundance of information on the way that the children preferred to learn in this new situation that I looked back to the work of Harris on learning styles in order to explain what I was finding. Despite Harris’ theories not being fashionable I have found them to be the most useful and accurate description of the learning of the children in the project. I have summarised Harris’ five learning styles in Table 2.1.
Table 2.1  
**Harris’ indigenous learning styles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning style</th>
<th>What this looks like</th>
<th>This is not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Observation and imitation</td>
<td>Learning, looking and copying</td>
<td>Talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal trial and error</td>
<td>Doing</td>
<td>Talk plus instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Real life</td>
<td>Real life and as a whole</td>
<td>Practice in artificial settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning in parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Real learning context</td>
<td>Specific skills</td>
<td>Generalisable principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Person-oriented</td>
<td>Focus on people / relations</td>
<td>Information oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, just as Boughton (2000) has taken the health/education dialogue into the broader sphere of social and political realities in Australia, so too has Harris further contextualised his learning theories, acknowledging that it is important to do so to authenticate these learning styles (1992). I found a particular aspect of his analysis that really ‘rang true’ with me. In discussing the hidden curriculum Harris identifies negotiation as ‘one of the most common political processes in Aboriginal society’ (p.9). He relates the balancing of obligation to family and land as very important and cites negotiation as a foundation principle of Aboriginal ways of living and learning. I agree with Harris and offer my own research and experience as a confirmation of this.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION**

Recently around the world there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of early intervention as a means of both ensuring that young children are given the best possible start to their lives and that the social and economic costs associated with the consequences of non-intervention are minimised.

In some work done for the Bernard van Leer Foundation, on the effectiveness of ECCD programs, Judith Evans noted that

… it is generally accepted that the programmes that expect to benefit young children must be embedded within their families, their community, and their cultural values; and that they must support children in the development of the physical, mental, and social abilities that will enable them to survive and thrive in later years (1998, p.2).
The Inter-relationship of Health and Education

In an occasional paper for the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Boughton (2000) uses ‘health transition’ research to investigate the correlations between education and health in the Northern Territory and the implications for further research. He explains that although research has indicated that increased education gives rise to increased health, this is only looking at the correlation, not the cause and proposes that further research into the why is undertaken. He argues that a more complex model of life choice and empowerment is a more appropriate tool for investigating this correlation. He uses the plateau in the declining infant mortality rates to propose the hypothesis that the decline from the mid-1960s was connected to ‘the growing political power and rising political consciousness among indigenous people, not simply to the expansion of health services’ (p.18) and further that ‘We might further hypothesise that the levelling-off of the decline in indigenous mortality rates in the last decade… may be related to the failure of land rights and self-determination movement to maintain its momentum in the face of the well-organised conservative reaction from the mining and pastoral industries in the 1980s and 1990s’ (p.19).

In this field of early childhood education and care there is a growing amount of research that shows not just that <better health = better education = better health> but that there is a synergy between children’s ‘psycho-social well-being and nutritional status and health’ (ECCD group 1998). Malin cites some of the research that indicates that ‘there is extensive research evidence to support the notion that schooling and literacy enhance population and individual health.’ (Malin 2002, p.1).

Komla Tsey, the then director of Menzies School of Health in Alice Springs, challenged professionals in the health sphere to become involved in education in his 1997 article Aboriginal Self-Determination, Education and Health: Towards a Radical Change in Attitudes to Education. He asserts that without improved education in Aboriginal Communities, health standards will not improve and that better education will result in better health.

...adult learning in Aboriginal Communities should aim not only at developing literacy and other skills among adults, but such programs should also aim at working closely with individuals and families to create environments conducive to Aboriginal children to develop their potentials through appropriate education (p.82).
What does all this mean? That no matter the cause there is a definite correlation between education and health that cannot be ignored. That a correlation between length of schooling and health has been found but this may not be causal. It has also been found that improved health impacts on early education but does not guarantee improved academic success in later life. There are more factors at play here than just education and health and it seems that Bob Boughton’s analysis could be the more accurate.

In this work I made the decision to take it as a given that any work we did to help the children and families access knowledge, skills and literacy competence would benefit the individuals as well as the community itself.

The influence of health on education

In recent years significant research into the brain development of young children has brought to light several significant findings. Firstly, lifelong neural pathways for learning can be formed during these years and that the formation of these pathways is determined by the factors of nutrition, stimulation and care. Once formed, these pathways are difficult to modify (ECCD 2002).

It is also noted by the ECCD that ‘by the time a child reaches school age, most key writing, language abilities, physical capabilities and cognitive foundations have been set in place’ (http://www.ecdgroup.com/eccdinfo.asp).

It is vital then that young children are given the opportunity to develop the neural pathways for literacy development from a very young age.

From a purely economic view, investing in the health and education of children under five provides a benefit in two ways:

1. The child’s brain develops the necessary pathways for learning.
2. The costs associated with interventions later in life are reduced.

There is an obvious and immediate impact on education where children suffer from ill-health. This has been widely documented in Central Australia and was not the focus of this research. In summary, most Aboriginal children living in Central Australia suffer from otitis media and associated hearing loss which may result in developmental delay and poor educational achievement (Malin 2002). Other health
problems that the babies may suffer from include low birth weight, malnutrition and respiratory and ear disease. All these can also result in developmental delay. While these health issues are all important they were not the focus of the research here.

This research and the ensuing focus on the absolute importance of ‘before school’, ‘under five’ literacy programs was knowledge that I shared with all participants in the program and gave us all a sense of the importance of the work that we were doing.

**Taking an holistic approach to health/education/community development**

As stated above, health and education are inter-woven influences on the lives of the community. The third major sphere of influence is the community itself – its structure, culture and operation. The three agencies responsible for these services are the school, the health centre and the community council. Increasingly, there is an acknowledgement that these three services must be delivered in response to community need rather than bureaucratic wont and done in a coordinated manner that maximises benefit and efficiency while minimising costs and the number of ‘visitors in Toyotas’ that arrive constantly often creating confusion and adding burden rather than helping.

The reality of these three organizations working together in culturally appropriate ways and directed by local needs and wants is that this is a difficult thing to do. Not only are there huge bureaucracies and funding bodies to work with but the dynamics of the people ‘on the ground’ means that it may come down to the individual personalities of the employees as to whether the school, health centre and community council work together or not (NTDE 1999).

What we chose to do within the project was to include health education and promotion as an every day part of our routine and teaching/learning program. This means that we did not collect any specific data on the health of the children but we did do lessons on cleaning teeth, using the toilet, visiting the dentist and so forth and basic hygiene was a part of the playgroup routine and incorporated into the literacy program. As much as possible we tried to coordinate all the agencies and the community council. This was our intent. The reality is further discussed in Chapter 5 under ‘working with other agencies’.
Parent education programs
This was another area that I grappled with. The project brief stated that I would work with parents to develop their understandings of the beginnings of literacy and appropriate activities that they could do with their children. A foundation submission for the development of the project came from the Parents as Teachers adviser working in Central Australia. But just what this would look like I was not sure and so became part of the research.

Again, I found a comparatively lot of information on including parents in school programs and on the importance of having parents involved in their children’s school-based education. However, I found very little specifically on Northern Territory parenting education programs for indigenous families. I have included as an appendix a review of some parent resources that I did evaluate.

Parent education programs in the United States
I did, however, find quite a lot of research on parent education programs generally and the different categorisations possible, mostly in the United States.

Some parent education programs run as intervention programs originating in an education program. One such famous family-based intervention program is the Head Start programs that were developed in the United States in the 1960s. These programs were an interventionist program aimed at preschool children and utilised an interagency approach in order to provide early education, immunisations, medical checkups, hot meals and social services to ‘disadvantaged children’. They relied on volunteers, consisting of a national headquarters and local initiatives (Schorr 1989). These programs were based on a model of operation that could be transferred from one place to another.

Various shifts in program beliefs and structures occurred over the next 30 years that mostly centred on the beliefs and values held by the parents. In the 1990s it was seen that a shift beyond the values model be made and that rather than blaming parents it is recognised that some families do not have the mechanisms for supporting the

^ See Appendix III.
educational achievements of their children. Encapsulated in the phrase ‘…move beyond desirable values model to a posture of reciprocity and mutual understanding’ (Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano & Daly 1995, p.802), this then brought the new wave of programs where the culture of the home families becomes part of the literacy program.

**Australian parent education programs**

Perhaps the seminal work in this area of indigenous parent education programs in Australia is Betty Watts’ work in the late 1970s in New South Wales which led to the establishment of family centres in that state. Watts’ action research *Focus on Parent/Child. Extending the Teaching Competence of Urban Aboriginal Mothers* reported on a family support program run in New South Wales in 1972-73 that had as its focus the mother/child ‘system’. In the first year, a white parent educator conducted the program; in the second year the team of parent educators was extended to include three Aboriginal mothers. Watts asserted that ‘if schools acted as if they were the sole or the most important influence on children the likely results is, for the majority of children, school failure’ (1978, p.2).

She also asserted that inadequate teacher training and the alienation of parents from schools was contributing to the failure of indigenous students at school. In Watts’ work however, I noted that the theme of ‘values’ and her assessment techniques that were an attempt to quantify data in the area of ‘parental success’ highlight the need for more qualitative measures in this area and reflect the same beliefs as were driving the American programs.

Other work that has been reported proposes a home visiting program that extrapolates into possibilities of establishing parent educators working from a school base (Cotterell 1994, p.116). In this article, the author proposes that through home visits and the provision of story books it is possible to ‘bring mother and child together on common ground and to stimulate conversation and reading’ and that these programs can be designed ‘to assist mothers to interact more effectively’ (Cotterell 1994, p.116). This work is using a cultural deficit model where the children are seen as lacking, e.g. ‘retarded in reading’ (Cotterell 1994, p.117) and the mothers needing guidance in their values system. Cotterell proposes that ‘what was important to the project was to assist mothers to see the value of engaging these
teaching functions and to see themselves as competent enough to perform these functions’ (Cotterell 1994, p.118).

In fact, the entire article is written from a negative viewpoint with a very judgmental framework. In reading this work I had the picture of the worker turning up to the houses to check up on the parents. I also noted that the author makes presumptions about the literacy levels of the parents by, for example, leaving them cards with notes about how to read to the children. Despite the claim that this program is following Betty Watts’ ideas, I found that the missing elements of training and working together preclude this.

This theme of ‘parental values’ is present in many early writings on the subject of early literacy and parent education programs and is still presented in more recent work. (Watts 1978; Dunn 1998; Guider 1991; Sparrow 1991; Chambers 1994; Cotterell 1991; Dunn 1999)

There has been some move into discussions of parental knowledge rather than values (Cummins 1986; Neuman et al. 1995) and in the light of the other shifts in practice such as socio-cultural literacy practices, negotiated curriculum, multi-agency approaches and needs-based programming there is a need for this shift to occur.

A number of ‘pre-packaged’ parenting programs that have developed overseas have been instigated in Australia. The HIPPY program (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters) run by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence in Melbourne originated in Israel and is a structured program aimed at working with parents to teach their children at home (Brotherhood of St Laurence 1998, p.1). It seeks to ‘break the cycle of disadvantage’ not only for children but for parents also. It aims to prepare the child for school success through fostering ‘cognitive development and a love of learning’. At the same time, the program empowers parents with ‘the confidence and skills necessary to take an active role in their children’s education, development and overall well being.’ The program runs through a system of coordinators, home tutors, group meetings, home visits and set materials. On its web page (www.hippy.org) the organisation states that
Learning and play mingle throughout HIPPY’s structured curriculum as parents encourage their children to recognize shapes and colours, tell stories, follow directions, solve logical problems, and acquire other school readiness skills (2002).

Obviously, this program is based on the ‘developmental’ model of literacy development and is culturally specific to its original target group. I discarded this model of operation as inappropriate to our situation.

As one of the initiators of this was the Parents as Teachers program I also considered whether it was an appropriate model for me to use in Aboriginal communities. The Parents as Teachers program runs on a home visit format using a set program developed in the United States. Its web page (www.patnc.org) states that

The program is designed to enhance child development and school achievement through parent education accessible to all families. It is a universal access model.

The PAT program focuses on sharing activities, ideas and knowledge with parents on the development and needs of their children at different ages and stages. PAT also runs groups and workshops for families. Support for parents is also given through the production of support resources. The organisation has a mission statement, visions, stated aims and goals.

Also found on their web page is research into the efficacy of the programs. As well as more general research, this shows that children in PAT families do ‘better’ at school.

Parents as Teachers curriculum and training address what reliable research has identified as the essential components of school readiness. Based on research in child development and early education, the National Education Goals Panel identified five areas that play key roles in children's success in school. Dimensions of school readiness, the Panel determined, include physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. Parents as Teachers curriculum and training are designed to support the development of the whole child and include visit plans and content that addresses each of these research-based readiness dimensions (http://www.patnc.org/resarchevaluation.asp).
Despite the rhetoric of the previous two programs, the reality has been that they are basically aimed at white middle-class Australia and have difficulty in adapting their programs to the needs of indigenous Australians in remote localities.

**DISCONNECTIONS BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL**

**What is this?**

When a child goes to school and the discourse, language, culture and communication are different from that at home, there is an impact on the learning of the child. There are two main methods for explaining and catering to this difference – either the school is at fault and must teach the child that comes, not the child it wants (curriculum deficit) – or the child (and their family) is at fault and they must better prepare the child for school (cultural deficit model). Or perhaps there is something in the middle. And perhaps it’s not a matter of blame but of knowledge, empowerment and collaborative teaching practices.

If home and school demonstrate conflicting values that influence children’s sense of self, then they may feel confused and alienated in the early childhood context. When children and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds, then the risk of alienation is increased. In some cases, children may find it hard to reconcile their concepts of ‘self at home’ and ‘self at school’ (Corrie & Maloney, in Partington 1998, p.221).

Cairney and Ruge conducted research into the differences in the language and literacy practices of schools, families and community groups in Australia. In particular, they examined matches and mismatches between the discourse practices of home and school and the impact that any differences have on students' school success. They concluded that not only is there a marked difference in the literacy practices and values between families and schools but that within families themselves the way that literacy is defined and used differs significantly.

Two major theories are put forward as possible explanations for the failure of schools in this context.

These two theories are:

1. Cultural discontinuity or cultural difference. Where the home culture is different, problems in communication and interaction may arise, working
against the learning of the students.

2. Structural inequality. The lack of educational success of students of diverse backgrounds reflects structural inequalities in the broader social, political and economic spheres. Schools work to maintain the status quo.

Batten et al encapsulate this ‘mismatch’ in the statement:

Although Aboriginal children come to school with highly developed language skills, they are often not well versed in the language of the school. These children are not used to the verbal social conventions of the school (such as greetings, saying please and thank you) or to the question-and-answer structure of verbal interaction in the classroom. As one teacher said, Aboriginal parents send their children to school hoping, thinking, and expecting that education happens in the classroom, unaware of the huge leap that their children have to make. With regard to literacy, one of the main gaps in Aboriginal children’s home preparation and support for school learning was the lack of books and reading to children (Batten, Frito, Hughes & McNamara 1998, p.201).

The impact of this disconnection
For those students who start school already competent in the practices of school there is an advantage – they make rapid advances in their literacy development. There is a further advantage when the literacy practices of home and school also match. However, for those students who come from a home where literacy and school practices do not look like those at home there is the chance that the students are disempowered to learn. And for those children who are unwell, tired, hungry or emotionally insecure there is the added burden of becoming well before they can be effective learners (Hill et al.1998; Cairney & Ruge 1997).

It is easy in this situation to label the child as deficient or blame the parents for not preparing the children for school. However, surely, this is an obvious case of lack of knowledge on the parents’ part and as such a reflection of the power imbalance in our society on the basis of cultural difference (Cummins 1986).

Strategies to overcome the home/school disconnection
Some strategies that have been suggested are to do with the literacy resources used. For example, ensuring that books that are used have Aboriginal characters in them is
one way for the school to embrace the home culture. Other strategies encompass the whole teaching practice, taking a more critical literacy approach where empowerment through respect of culture and L1\(^9\) instruction leads to increased academic achievement (Cummins 1986).

Malin exhorts that we don’t discard the construct of cultural difference entirely, merely because of the concern that one may be stereotyping, but rather to ‘be aware of the various ways that culture influences human perception, communication, and learning, whether in oneself or someone else’ (Malin 1994, p.85).

There is clear evidence that the parents of Aboriginal children in general support the schools’ teaching of English literacy (Batten et al. 1998; NTDE 1999). However, as partners in the education process, families need to do more – they need to encourage regular attendance and participation in school and be involved in the learning of the children. However, as stated previously, many Aboriginal families do not have the knowledge to be able to do this and the cycle of disadvantage continues.

**ASSESSMENT**

**Overview of assessment**

The project required an assessment instrument in order to provide some feedback on whether it was helping to foster emergent literacy development in the children. We are educating in an era of accountability through quantification. Education systems, business and the community are placing a high importance on assessment and reporting mechanisms. Teachers use assessment practices to gather information about what students know, have learned and can do. The two main types of assessment are *formative* (feedback to students and teacher as the learning is happening) and *summative* (have the learning outcomes been met?). Systems, however, also place assessment requirements on students through compulsory testing and reporting. For example, the literacy testing done in Years Three, Five and Eight across Australia provides information to the system and only incidental information to the teachers to use in the specific learning situation. The results of these MAP tests have provided invaluable source data that prove the inequities of indigenous English

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9 L1 = person’s first language; L2 = person’s second or subsequent language
literacy development compared with ‘mainstream’ development. This was discussed in Chapter 1.

In Australia, it has been recognised that in fact different kinds of assessment can favour one group over another. For example, multiple choice questioning favours boys over girls (Brady & Kennedy 2001). Assessment itself then can exacerbate the inequities that it may itself be attempting to measure.

Generally, in a classroom, different kinds of assessment tools will be used and the teacher or student choice will be influenced by the learning situation and the reporting need. Assessment gathers the information, reporting processes, records and publishes this information. The purpose and the context of the learning and the assessment will determine which strategy is used.

Brady and Kennedy (2001) give an excellent overview of the different types of assessment mechanisms used in classrooms.

1. Tests – these are usually teacher-devised and standardised.
   a. Multiple-choice
   b. True-false
   c. Short answer
   d. Matching
   e. Cloze
   f. Interpretive
   g. Concept maps
   h. Essays/extended writing
   i. Interviews/conferences

2. Performance assessment – information is gathered through observation.
   a. Anecdotal records
   b. Checklists
   c. Rating scales

3. Product assessment
   a. Portfolios
   b. Exhibitions
   c. Projects

4. Self-assessment
a. Journals  
b. Other performance and product assessments as appropriate  

**Issues in assessment**  
The validity and appropriateness of assessment has been questioned in the light of many different factors. Two in particular are relevant to this context.  

*Authentic vs traditional assessment*  
Traditionally, assessment tools were devised by teachers in response to the syllabus content that was being taught. They were ‘extras’ to the program and were by definition decontextualised from the learning itself. A shift in assessment practice that has occurred has been to what is termed authentic assessment. This assessment practice is embedded within the learning and forms a part of the learning process itself. The term ‘authentic’ refers to real-world tasks. This type of testing is more individualised to the students themselves and can make the assessment task itself more meaningful. However, the results of authentic assessment tasks are not usually generalisable across a population. This then presents a conflict of purpose for assessment – system versus individuals. The *purpose* of the assessment determines the assessment tool that is required (Emmit 1999).  

*Cross-cultural assessment*  
The other factor in assessment that goes hand in hand with purpose is context. In this particular cross-cultural context there is a growing debate on the need for and efficacy of various assessment techniques.  

An assessment mechanism that relies on western cultural mores such as the technique of asking questions one already knows the answer to may create an immediate barrier to the acquisition of information. In Aboriginal Australia, this kind of questioning is often seen not only as strange but as ill-mannered (Kearins 1988). Aboriginal people in Central Australia use this questioning technique differently from non-indigenous educators working with them. It is completely acceptable to ignore a question – there is no expectation on the person being asked the question to in fact answer it. If the person being asked the question believes that you already know the answer then they may not answer the question. There may a considerable amount of time between the asking and the answering while the
respondent thinks through the answer. Silence can be used as a response to perceived rudeness (Harris 1984). The high incidence of hearing loss also impacts on assessment – students may not be able to physically hear the questions (Boughton 2000).

The assessor then must keep all this in mind when designing an assessment instrument. One response to this is to adapt the questions to those that are more socially appropriate – for example, asking questions that you do not know the answer to. A second is to find other ways of gathering information and displaying knowledge that are more appropriate. This reflects the general move in assessment methodologies to authentic assessment away from standardised testing.

Other problems that indigenous students may have with assessment may include language differences where the student is being assessed in their second or subsequent language whereas their cognition is occurring in their first language. The extra processing involved takes away working memory space and impacts on the results achieved.

In a situation where the test, the tester and the testing customs are different, it has been acknowledged that people are ‘likely to appear less competent than they actually are’ (Goodnow 1988, p.17). In order to facilitate the assessment process children need to understand the purpose of the assessment task. This can be explicitly stated by the teacher. For example, ‘we’re doing this to see how much you’ve learned since last time’. The task itself must also be familiar to the students – both content and process. With Aboriginal students the person conducting the assessment must also be familiar in order for the task to be authentic.

There is also the impact of the knowledge that teachers assume the students will have. For example, Kearins found that while relatively few indigenous students knew their home address (26%), most of the children attending the university preschool did know this (74%). However, when asked in what direction they lived, 58% of the indigenous children could demonstrate this knowledge, whereas none of the university preschool children could (Kearins 1988).
This assumed knowledge is more than that of the teacher alone. In this context, it is also about the very education system itself and its priorities for learning. In the preschool context, it is expected that children will learn to count, and learn their letters and be familiar with books – and teddy bears. And most non-indigenous parents begin this teaching process from a very young age – counting toes, picking colours, reading stories. The Aboriginal students in this context have very different but nonetheless valid knowledge. Assessment then should also be a mechanism for the students to display knowledge and skills that they already have. Being able to recognise just what this looks like in this context is a challenge when working cross-culturally as was the situation here. I used two main mechanisms to maintain validity of my observations. The first was to ask the children’s families what they could see the children knew or could do; the second was my own experience as a teacher of indigenous children.

Kearins (1988) also suggests that the very notion of assessment itself is intrinsically alien to Aboriginal people, who view all children as whole beings in themselves, rather than ‘better’ than each other in some way. However, contrasted with this are the system requirements for data. Funding depends on results and data. To gather this information requires testing.

…it has become imperative that indigenous students acquire the skills of test-taking, such as focussing, attending to time, trying their best, learning to recognise and respond to the different genres of questions such as multiple choice, completion, true/false, problem solving, etc.; analysing items; remembering content; and thinking clearly and logically (Cataldi & Partington 1998, p.311).

As has been the case many times throughout this project, the needs of the system are forcing changes in practice that may be by their very nature assimilationist.

**Assessment in indigenous early childhood education**

In my readings on assessment, especially in the field of Early Childhood assessment, I encountered a conflict between current ideals and current requirements; a divergence between theories and practice. Many Early Childhood practitioners would argue against the imposition of assessment on young children. Many others argue that assessment gives vital information to facilitate effective programming, teaching and early intervention. This is also the era of accountability where policy
makers require information through measurement (Cataldi & Partington 1998; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2000; Mindes, Ireton & Mardell-Czudnowski 1996).

Children in preschools learn through play-based programs that integrate all areas of their development. Teachers then must use developmentally appropriate assessment practices. The most commonly used assessment practices in preschools that are seen to be both developmental in nature and appropriate are those of teacher observation and individual records, both time consuming activities (Quinn 1999).

As has been discussed earlier in this work, the federal government has designed a developmental continua for indigenous preschoolers, called the ‘Preschool Profile’ that is intended to provide baseline data for the MAP tests.

CHAPTER SUMMARY
In this chapter I have presented the major theories, understandings and writings relating to the topics covered in this thesis. This has built on the framework of Chapter 1 that outlined the research problem.

In the next chapter I will move to present the specific methodologies used in this *action research* project.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION
In this chapter I will present the mechanics of the research – how it was actually conducted and the reasoning behind my choices of different methodologies and processes. This builds onto the first and second chapters which set the outside context for this research – the historical, social and academic contexts. This chapter is about the research process rather than the literacy curriculum program which is covered in the following chapter. This chapter describes the mechanics of the research process. The instrumentation used to evaluate the curriculum is explained in Chapter 6 because it constitutes part of the research findings.

Firstly, in this chapter, I will explore the technique of action research and how the action and the research fit together. I will then present the details of my methodologies – the selection of participants, the instruments used to collect data, the field procedures for each of the three sites, the data collecting and recording and the processing and analysis of that data. Following this I will discuss the methodological assumptions I have made and the limitations of this research.

Overview of the Research
As stated earlier, this research was conducted at three different sites over two years. It used an action research method to document the ‘Targeting Early Literacy – Family and School’ project that I was employed to do by the Northern Territory Department of Education.

The action research method was integrated into the literacy project in an ongoing way entailing detailed documentation of what was happening on a daily basis and of my thoughts about the effectiveness of the strategies being employed in the Literacy project. In order to determine whether there was any change in the children’s behaviours in response to the playgroups, I needed to select and then isolate particular behaviours which were of interest and then count them. The selection of these countable behaviours was grounded in real life experience, and was validated by consultation with the parent and colleagues.
There is a problem with generalisability (external validity) and replicability (external reliability) with action research. Because of the unique nature of each research setting, and the cultural specificity of the participants, findings from one setting may not be generalisable to another. Furthermore, because of the uncontrolled nature of the research, it may not be possible or desirable to replicate the exact conditions of one play group in another setting. Because of this, I looked for general principles underlying the success or failure in the three different settings. The principles may be generalisable but the specific conditions in which they occur may vary (Wiersma 1995).

In this research, rigour was achieved through the systematic documentation of the entire process through diary notes, photographs, written records, interviews, video footage and participant’s comments. When evidence suggested that further clarification was required, consultation with parents and colleagues, combined with my own critical reflection served to refocus the research.

**WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?**

As the very name makes clear, this method of research has two facets – action and research. It has been very clearly defined by one of Australia’s leading exponents of action research, Bob Dick as follows:

Action research is a flexible spiral process which allows action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) to be achieved at the same time. The understanding allows more informed change and at the same time is informed by that change. People affected by the change are usually involved in the action research. This allows the understanding to be widely shared and the change to be pursued with commitment (Dick 2002, p.1).

Action research is a very broad term that can be applied appropriately to many different research situations (Wadsworth 1998).

Again, from Bob Dick’s work comes this simple yet effective diagrammatic representation of the research process involved here.
The process begins with planning, action is taken and then this action critically reviewed. This then leads to more planning which leads to action and so on. Throughout this process the researcher is always reflecting critically on all aspects of the research. As the research continues, a spiral is created. Following the spiral then, as the process continues through the research, the data becomes clearer and clearer and results in answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the research as well as those that resulted from the reflection throughout the research itself (Wadsworth 1998).

In this way, groups of people can reflect on the changes they are making and share this knowledge with other people (Wadsworth 1998). This participation is one of the key elements of action research.

In summary, action research is a research methodology that is used when one is trying to effect change and understanding at the same time and includes the participation of all the people involved at the various levels of the research itself. It is not so much about numbers alone but is largely qualitative in nature.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

In establishing the project and the research to fit within that project, I was very conscious of my dual role as both literacy educator and researcher. While this did create a dual role for me it also gave me more flexibility in my approaches. The research methodology itself evolved alongside the programs and with my own growing understandings. Certain elements were there as intentions, but their
specifics could not be determined without first beginning the research. For example, it was my intention to assess the children for ‘readiness for school’ type behaviour and for literacy behaviours. Just what that would look like and the process of developing some sort of useful tool was in itself part of the research.

Various data collection techniques were employed. These included the following and will be elaborated on further in the chapter.

- Participant observation
- Interviewing
- Careful listening to what family members and others were saying
- Trialling assessment techniques
- Observing children’s responses and recording through:
  - Photographic records
  - Videos
  - Samples of work
  - Diary notes
- Playgroup planning, evaluation and reporting

All these data were then taken away and processed. Any conclusions I reached, questions I had, or ideas I formulated, were then fed back to participants and implemented. I then monitored the changes and the subsequent actions of the participants.

All of these techniques evolved over the period of the research. The main intention was to work with the interested communities, record what happened and then analyse it. Reflection on the findings then led to new questions, new data and more talking, thus following the spiral of action research. In this manner then, the program was constantly evaluated through ongoing trialling, observing and documenting process.

The development of the assessment instrument to use with the children was also part of the evaluation process and was not developed until midway through the project. Although other assessment instruments were trialled, they were ineffective and inappropriate. These instruments will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

**SELECTION OF SUBJECTS**
Community A was a designated community – the decision to run the project there had been made before the project began. Education Department senior management made the decision on the basis of the following factors:

- It was very close to Alice Springs and so could remove the element of long travel when establishing the first of the projects.
- The local teacher was requesting some assistance and professional support.
- This community was seen by management as a ‘difficult community’ so that, if the project succeeded there, it would ‘succeed anywhere’.

However, initial negotiation with the school and community was still undertaken along the same lines as the other communities who had expressed interest in participating in the project.

My method was simple. A mail out to all schools in the southern region of the Northern Territory was conducted and all those schools responding received an introductory information visit by the project officer, me. In this introductory session the developmental nature of early literacy was explored in a parent meeting and the offer of the project made. The on-site principal of the school conducted the negotiations for the school and information and request for permission letters went to the local community presidents. The communities were given some time to consider whether they wanted the project or not and discussions occurred between me and the principals. A reference group was formed in order to monitor the project and make decisions about which communities would be involved in the project. Finally, Community A and Community B were chosen which led to the project running in three sites as Community C is a small Homelands only 40 kilometres from Community B. Although there were two other communities who wanted the project, the decision was made by the reference group to limit the project to three sites so that more could be achieved within the time frame. I have to admit that I was relieved by this as the amount of travel already involved required that I was at times away from home two weeks out of three.

Not all families consented to be part of the research that is being reported here. None of these families were excluded from the project work. Overall statistics included some of the children from non-participating families. However, any data relating specifically to assessment were from participating families only. In order for there to
be informed consent, a plain language statement\textsuperscript{10} was written and individual discussions held with each participating parent. The consent form was also written in plain English\textsuperscript{11} and participants were given the option of withdrawing their consent at any time during the research. No participants chose to withdraw their consent during or after the project.

**FIELD PROCEDURES**

The action research process began when the ‘Targeting Early Literacy - Family and School’ project started running at Community A in February 1998. In July 1998 the project started with Community B and Community C as well. All three sites continued to run until the end of 1999. The detailed running of the literacy program will be presented in Chapter 4. In this section I will present an overview of the research context and procedures used at each site.

**Community A**

Playgroups at Community A ran in 1998 but then changed to home visits as people moved on and I looked to alternatives as I felt that the project wasn’t working. Playgroups were held at various locations, changing as numbers and interest waned and I made the decision to try somewhere else, after talking it over with the women who were around at the time. Places we held playgroup were: the old childcare centre, at people’s homes and in the school grounds. Community A once had a childcare centre. It ran for a period of about six months, funded through the community council. The women told me that it was good for a while but then because of family differences women stopped going. Then the building was vandalised and the women lost heart. Playgroups were small, with an average of six children and four women attending. As the project continued, two main family groups attended playgroups and so it evolved to home visits with these two families. Other families were visited on request but this seldom happened and then it was more at the urging of the non-indigenous council worker who thought a family could ‘do with some help’. None of these visits resulted in establishing further family visits or playgroups.

\[\textsuperscript{10}\text{See Appendix IV}\]

\[\textsuperscript{11}\text{Simple tense English written to be accessible to speakers of English as a second language. See Appendix V.}\]
Community B
I worked with the Community B school and the women to run playgroups for the young children. These were held at the Women’s Centre, out bush and then at the school. In 1999 the women moved the playgroup into the school and made it into the ‘Community B preschool program’. At this time it changed from being held only when I was there and run by me to being held four days a week and being run by a paid local indigenous worker at the school. I then acted as a visiting adviser, assisting the worker with her planning, initially visiting once per week and for the last six months or so, once per fortnight.

Community C
At Community C, playgroup was held each time I would visit. Playgroup space was created by the use of a big round tarp and held in the warmest or coolest or least windy spot, depending on the weather. I visited Community C each time that I visited Community B and would arrive and leave on the same or next day, staying only as long as I needed to in order to run playgroup. On an initial visit, accompanied by the principal of Community B we consulted with the ‘old man’ of the community as to who would be the woman who would be my contact in the community and who would be the appropriate alternative if she wasn’t around. This was the right thing to do, culturally, and made it a lot easier for me driving into Community C because everyone knew who I was and who I was looking for and why.

DATA COLLECTING AND RECORDING
Data collected within this research can be separated into two main groups – evidence collected and my own reflections.

Evidence collected
This evidence includes photographs of the children at work, videos, the samples of the children’s writing and painting and charts done by the parents. It also includes the books that we made. I created a file for each child where all paperwork and work samples were kept. Photographs were kept both in an album as well as being placed in the children’s own files when they showed evidence of learning. Also assessments done with the children were kept in individual student files.
I interviewed some of the participant adults about their own education experiences, using a survey form to write down their responses. One family agreed to have their interviews included in the project’s final report. Each interview consisted of the same questions. I used the questions to initiate discussion and jotted down notes as people responded. In every interview I restated what I thought the person had said in order to ensure that I had not misinterpreted their statements. The interview responses are presented in detail in Chapter 5.

Briefly, the questions posed were:

- Name
- Date of Birth
- Community
- Children
- Languages Spoken
- Languages Understood
- Where did you go to school?
- Did you get a strong education?
- Why/why not?
- What education did your parents get?
- What education/future do you want for your children?
- Anything else?

Posters were created and published with the Community B women in a side project. These posters were sent to all communities in central Australia and were designed to be a mechanism for the women at Community B to share the knowledge developed in the project with other Aboriginal communities in central Australia. The development of the posters included identifying what knowledge we wished to share; the discussions; the layout and the language used. These all provided learning together points between the parents and me. In the end, we made a book that consisted of four pages. Whereas I suggested that we should write definitive statements – ‘Read to your child’, the women at Community B were very definite that it was more effective to write what you could see in the picture. We ended up by

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12 Funded by the ‘Early Childhood Programs for Indigenous Children Project’.
designing the page to have the definitive statement at the top of the page and two annotated photographs to illustrate each point.

For example:

At Community B we are getting our children ready for school by: reading together 
and by giving our children books to read.

1. R is reading a book to N. S.D. wrote the story ‘Going to the Dentist at
Community B.’
2. We give our children books to read. N and R are having a great time reading
together.

I also collected evidence to ascertain the level of community interest in published literature and literacy materials. This targeted research was conducted at Community B and will be presented in more detail in Chapter 5.

My own reflections
This second group of data consists of my own notes and reflections. As well as the planning and evaluations of the playgroups themselves I also kept field diaries. As a participant observer working and researching in a cross-cultural research environment I considered the effect of my own participation in the project as one of the major factors of the research and my reflections on the work itself also formed part of the data collection. My diary notes were written on the road after a session and reflected both my professional and personal observations of the visit. This would entail me driving out of the community and stopping by the side of the road in order to reflect and record those observations.

DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS
In order to make some sense out of my field notes and visit reports, I created a ‘what works’ data base and listed all the different activities and guidelines that were coming out of the data. This was a mechanism for taking the information in the diaries of the researcher and putting it into a more accessible format. Fifty-seven entries were made detailing particular mechanisms, guiding principles, activities and methodologies for early literacy teaching and the running of ‘prior to school’ programs.
Different genres of books were written by myself and the women and then created by me in order to investigate the text type that the children responded to the most. I kept notes on what I was hearing and seeing in relation to the use and longevity of these books.

I talked and networked with all participants, teachers, advisers and professional colleagues about what we were doing and what we were seeing in order to gain the widest possible evaluation and verification of the work.

In order to process the data collected using our assessment tool, I created tables that summarised the information in terms of which community, what gender the child was, and his or her age. I then represented the information graphically in order to find patterns in the data. These data is presented fully in Chapter 6. These patterns then helped me to reflect on the photographic and work sample evidence that I had been analysing. Working from one to the other strengthened my conclusions. Throughout the analysis there was a need for me to continue to revise and refine my own definitions of best practice, emergent literacy and the stages of learning.

I still continue to analyse and process the data that I collected. The contemplation of what I have collected is an on-going pedagogical consideration that any teacher well understands. There are many different layers to assessment and evaluation. These layers continue to present themselves.

VALIDATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS
As stated earlier, the cyclical or spiral process of action research was one I followed in conducting this project. In order to check the accuracy of my interpretations and conclusions I used a number of different mechanisms. An essential ingredient of this research was the discussions I held with the participants of the project – everything I thought I was seeing was checked, both during the project and at the end through the project’s final report. Each playgroup was carefully planned and evaluated and reported on to the education management and to the reference group as well as to the school. In order to check what was happening in people’s homes, I visited people and talked with them about how the children were learning and what was happening at home with reading and writing. I also talked through what I was doing and seeing
with my colleagues in the education department’s regional office and teachers from other schools.

An undertaking was given by me that the final report would be taken to their communities for discussion, verification and endorsement. This was done via a report document that was sent to all participants and to all those within the NTDE who responded to a mailout asking for interest. I talked through this report with all participants to gain their endorsement and signature before publication, interviewing each respondent as I went to find out what their final understandings of the project were and what they thought was good or otherwise with the project. This research report is a more formal analysis and reporting of essentially the same content.

**DISSEMINATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

I created a PowerPoint presentation of the project and presented the project across the Territory to generate discussion about the work we were doing. This reflection was an important part of my consideration of the research data. Permission was gained from all those people whose photographs were used in the presentation. This visual reporting was very successful and effective and was used with a wide audience that consisted of: students, families, teachers, support agencies, the Australian Early Childhood Association conference, the *Learning Lessons* Review, NTDE personnel, NTU personnel and the Northern Territory Indigenous Education Research Association.

The final 72-page report of the ‘Targeting Early Literacy - Family and School’ project was developed in consultation with participants in the project and published through the NTDE. Copies were disseminated throughout all schools in the southern region of the Northern Territory, to Aboriginal organisations in Alice Springs and to other service organisations. All participants in the ‘Targeting Early Literacy - Family and School’ project received a copy of the report.

**METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

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13 Attachment 1
The biggest assumption must be that I was able to accurately record or even observe literacy behaviours in the three sites and that I was not simply seeing what I wanted to see.

I also made the assumption that behaviours that I observed were generalised behaviours that were repeated at home and not occurring only in our specific, isolated learning context. This ‘ritualised’ behaviour has been noted in other contexts such as reading (Christie 1982) and it was a concern of mine that this may be the case here. That perhaps the women and children were ‘doing’ playgroup for my benefit on the basis of relationship rather than as a valid experience of their own. Because I was not a member of the communities and not always around to see what was going on apart from our playgroup time I relied on talking with the women and with the school staff to assess what impact if any our playgroups were having on the learning of the children. According to both Sally\textsuperscript{14}, the local Aboriginal Assistant Teacher who was running playgroup with me, and the principal at Community B, playgroups were running when I wasn’t there, along the same lines as when I was there. This is not to discount the fact that these are not completely separate issues and the mutual obligations of relationship in this cross-cultural situation are a valid basis for initiating action.

**RESEARCHING IN AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY**

**Over-research problem**
I have found, in my readings, in my research and in my life many instances of indigenous people stating that they do not want to be continually researched. It is acknowledged that ‘…indigenous people are the subjects of repeated investigations and research’ (NTDE 1999, p.25) and yet indigenous people of the Northern Territory, despite having made submissions to a growing number of reports and research, are still willing to contribute to such investigations.

Indigenous peoples in Australia and the USA have often bemoaned that they are the most researched people on earth. Many have felt that despite this research, their lot has improved little as a consequence. Almost always, the research has been conducted by non-indigenous researchers and the research has followed an agenda

\textsuperscript{14} Not her real name
and process and produced an outcome that benefited the researcher, with little
flowing back to the community in repayment (Malin 1999, p.1).

My research is yet another example of a non-indigenous researcher conducting
research from within a large government organisation. The possibilities for the
impact of this were forever in my mind when doing this work and when designing
research instruments.

One thing I found in my work was not only the desire of the women to participate in
the work and to talk through with me what I thought I might be seeing, but I also
found the women to be passionate in their commitment to wanting to help their
children learn and succeed at school. I felt that although my work may have been
weakened by my non-Aboriginality this was balanced by the absolute need of the
women for there to be new shared knowledge that may benefit their children.

The implications
The implications of having a non-indigenous researcher researching within an
indigenous context are myriad and will impact on the research itself. Can a non-
indigenous researcher truly know what they are doing, will the indigenous
participants truly participate, and is it necessary and appropriate? This must be
balanced with the need for the research itself.

It is generally agreed that research conducted by non-indigenous researchers can only
attain authenticity by the creation of a coalition of all participants, both indigenous
and non-indigenous, and all aspects of the research are negotiated together. This
involves consultation before the research as well as the active involvement of the
community. Two factors of the worthiness of the research have also been identified -
benefit to the community and high ethical standards of the researcher.

Eckermann, Roberts and Kaplan in their 1994 article reporting on their research into
observed behaviours in a preschool, discussed the collaborative research practices
used in their research. They raise the notion of ‘cultural safety’ and its application to
the research situation. They used a number of principles in guiding their research,
calling them the MURRIE principles:
M meaningful and interesting
U useful and practical
R responsive and relevant
R reflective
I involving and collaborative
E ethical and challenging


These principles guided my study as did those proposed by Bouma that:

The responsible researcher is considerate, does nothing to injure, harm or disturb the participants in research, keeps data collected on individuals and groups secure, accurately records information and reports the findings of the research in a public manner (Bouma 2000, p.201).

The ethics of the research undertaken then will be the foundation of the research that is developed and its undertaking. Bouma suggests that the principles of ethical research will include the following (my paraphrasing, Bouma 2000, p.194-199):

• Treat participants with dignity and respect.
• The research must be soundly based on the knowledge and work of others and be properly supervised by qualified persons.
• The potential benefits must outweigh the potential harm to participants.
• There must be informed, voluntary participation.
• The research must be conducted openly and publicly and with accountability.

Osborne (1995, p.15) states it very simply - speak with oppressed minorities, not about, not for.

Such has been my intention here, though not always my result. This is a consequence I believe of my own growing knowledge and experience as a researcher and a teacher and is a goal to work towards.

**ETHICAL ISSUES**

My ethics as a researcher formed the foundation of my work. My awareness of the issues surrounding the research and its context and my own intention to conduct ethical research did in fact form part of the research process itself. Before any research was conducted I discussed and presented each participant with a consent form. Not everyone signed. They were treated no differently as project participants.
I was also very aware to maintain transparent processes – no reports were written unless they were available to everyone – either through the school, through the system or through playgroup itself. In fact, the research itself was conducted by everyone with me being the recorder and analyst.

In order to ensure that the information was presented in clear and appropriate ways I used many different techniques to present our findings to the many different audiences including the participants.

**LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH**

**The researcher**

*My qualifications*

I do not have Early Childhood qualifications in my initial degree or in my teaching qualifications. I am in fact qualified as an ESL teacher and have worked in remote indigenous education in Central Australia for over eight years. This work has been as an Early Childhood teacher, as a Teacher-Linguist, Project Officer and Manager of the Early Childhood Program within the Indigenous Education Branch of the NTDE. For these reasons I decided to focus more on the elements of the programs and on literacy learning than on the specific early childhood theories of learning so that I could best utilise my own expertise and knowledge. I must acknowledge that an early childhood educator may have done things differently - however, it may be that an early childhood educator may have brought too much preconception to the research and so I feel it balances.

*My ethnicity*

The other limitation, as expressed earlier, is that I am a non-indigenous woman working with indigenous families and am not a family member. This itself meant that it took longer for me to establish my relationships with people. The fact that I had worked in remote communities in Central Australia for a number of years and had close relationships with people that were in some ways related to the project participants, helped to create these relationships. Without exception, every situation with every family, or group, required some time and talk to establish these connections. This also meant that there was always a 'two-way' learning process taking place, where I would be learning as well as teaching and watching. This meant that at times I would be almost overcome with the intensity of the experiences
and touched by the care and sharing coming from the families. While this of course meant that the work was richer and my own experiences were deeper, it also meant that at times my field notes were exhausted emotional ramblings.

**RESTATEMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL HYPOTHESIS**

Once the work was completed and the data collected, it was time to analyse it. What I was looking for was twofold:

- **The big picture** - What were the different models of ‘before school’ programs that evolved at the three different sites?
- **The inside picture** - What literacy behaviours did I observe? How could these be encouraged?

What I found was in many ways very common sense and obvious and in others very thought provoking and exciting.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This research used an action research approach. This cyclical process itself evolved over the two years and my own learnings and understandings became part of it. In this Chapter I have presented the mechanics of that research – the data collection and analysis tools – as well as the assumptions and limitations associated with this research. This has built onto the setting of the research scene provided in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. The assessment mechanism used in this research will be presented in the following, Chapter 4.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EARLY LITERACY AND SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT
CHAPTER 4: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EARLY LITERACY AND SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

INTRODUCTION
This chapter builds on to the assessment section in Chapter 2 where I explored the education and system needs of assessment data, the key issues and implications for assessment and the tools of assessment itself. I will now move to the practical application of assessment in this context. In particular, I will present the assessment tool, the checklist, that we developed within this project and discuss the efficiency of the tool itself as a measure of the children’s learning.

As well as presenting the content of the checklist I will analyse some of its flaws and usefulness. The issues of assessment and reporting were central to the project. Not only were we assessing students in a cross-cultural, cross-linguistic learning situation but we were assessing in a new context. There were very few supporting mechanisms available to us. Assessment itself then became a developmental process of trial, reflection and adaptation.

I firstly tried various published mechanisms and then decided to develop my own when the tools I was using did not suit the children or the teaching/learning situation.

MECHANISMS THAT WE TRIALLED
Two tracking mechanisms, First Steps Writing Developmental Continuum (Education Department of Western Australia 1997) and the Northern Territory English as a Second Language Writing Profile (NTDE BOS 1999) were trialled. While the First Steps mechanism is a ‘birth to death’ continuum, I found it did not contain enough ‘small steps’ to allow for the tracking of the early stages of literacy development in this context. Most of the youngest children participating in this research did not meet any indicators at all, with one or two four year olds achieving some indicators.

For example, after six months participation in the project, Brenda, from Community A, met the following minor indicators from the First Steps Writing Developmental Continuum (DC) in Phase 1, Role-Play Writing.

• Knows some favourite parts of stories, rhymes, jingles or songs
• Attempts to write own name
I chose Brenda to assess in this way because she was the oldest and most advanced student in the project who was about to start school. Her family had also consented to me compiling information about her and her family into a case study. At the time of assessment, it must be noted that Brenda was evidencing only beginning behaviours and was not familiar with written texts or writing. I felt that the information gleaned from the DC did not give enough useful information to use with parents.

In attempting to use the NT Outcomes Profile, while some of the children exhibited indicators for the Beginning Level 1 of writing, because of the classroom focus of the indicators and the nature of the profiles being that of entry to school, I found this tracking mechanism to be not as useful as it would be when the students started school.

In attempting to use both of these tools, the challenge of working across cultures and languages was encountered. In this case the assessor, me, was a non-indigenous English L1 speaker attempting to assess English literacy indicators with children whose first languages were not Standard Australian English. In all cases I held discussions with family members in order to ensure that observed behaviours were accurate. In order to move ‘one step back’ from these tools, I attempted to use an assessment tool similar to that used by Moira Dunn (1997). In fact, Dunn used a total of seven different tasks over five different data collection sessions with indigenous children in north-central NSW (Dunn 1997, pp.80-87). These tasks are summarised in Table 4.1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASK</th>
<th>INTENTION</th>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Environmental print task</td>
<td>To determine the extent and nature of print awareness for groups of young children.</td>
<td>Twelve familiar items such as a box of corn flakes and a mars bar were selected. The test was administered in 3 phases: 1. children asked to read label. 2. next day, children asked to read photocopies of labels. 3. names of objects changed into simple type and children asked to read them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Letter identification task</td>
<td>To test each child’s knowledge of both upper and lower case letters and/or their accompanying sound.</td>
<td>A one-on-one test was conducted using a scoring sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Picture sequencing task</td>
<td>To determine whether the child could infer meaning from pictures on the printed page and use a sequence of pictures to create meaning.</td>
<td>Four pictures were selected that told a story in sequence. Four categories of data were recorded on a spreadsheet: 1. directionality. 2. able to infer meaning from pictures. 3. has an idea of story sequence. 4. got the point of the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reading task</td>
<td>To provide opportunities to observe emergent reading behaviour in a group of preschool children such as book/print awareness.</td>
<td>Each child chose one unknown storybook from a choice of two. This story was read to them three times over two weeks and then the child was asked to read the story and their reading behaviour was observed. Their reading was recorded and transcribed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Retelling task</td>
<td>To look at a range of developing skills such as complexity of sentence structure, story continuity etc. This also provided information on the development of oral language.</td>
<td>A story chosen by the child from a selection is read several times and then the child was asked to retell the story in their own words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sand/concepts about print/concepts about print test</td>
<td>To assess such knowledge as front/back of book, what is a word, a letter, punctuation etc</td>
<td>Used the Sand/Concepts about Print book developed by Clay in 1991. This book contains the instructions for administering the test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Writing Task</td>
<td>To develop an overview</td>
<td>Two writing tasks were given. The first</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I discussed how to assess the children’s reading abilities with some of the parents at Community B. We decided to trial the environmental print task.

We began our trial in September 1998. In order to discover just which objects might be familiar to the children at Community B, we searched the community for discarded coke cans, bread wrappers and some cans of food including baked beans. I then purchased from the local store a group of fresh items. We then attempted to assess the children’s reading by asking them to identify what things were. This was done within the familiar context of playgroup and with myself and the child’s carer asking them to identify what things were. We did not have any immediate success with this task. The children were shy and reluctant to engage in the task at all. When we persisted with the questioning some of the children became frustrated with us and moved away from where we were sitting. The children then decided not to answer the questions.

I interpreted this ‘failure’ as not a problem with the task itself but how and where it was administered. In this first year of the project, children were still learning skills for participation in formal learning activities such as sitting still to listen to stories and learning the ‘performance’ associated with ‘western style education’ such as having to answer questions put to you by someone who is not a member of your family. This meant those questions such as ‘what’s this?’ from the researcher, when holding up a loaf of bread resulted in avoidance of the answer and a general feeling of the absurdity and the artificiality of the whole process.

At the time, the assessment mechanism itself proved to be too far removed from the real life of the children themselves.

The other difference between our context and that of Dunn’s was not only that our students were generally much younger but also that these children had no or very little English and were coming from a non-literate culture. They were also inexperienced with assessment as a cultural moré.
While it may be argued that the learning of ‘assessment behaviour’ may be a necessary part of what a child experiences during their schooling years, it did not seem appropriate to develop this in children who were not attending any formalised child care services at all. There was also the issue of language and cultural difference. This highlighted the need for the assessment task to be incorporated into the naturally occurring events of the playgroup context. Dunn’s environmental print task then did not work in this context. It did however provide much needed direction and ideas and informed the creation of our own mechanism.

THE MECHANISM WE CREATED

I felt that the kinds of assessment items which would fit with the age and cultural background of these young central Australian Aboriginal children may be useful for other such children in remote Central Australia who speak indigenous languages as their first language and who will be learning in English once they commence formal education.

I also reflected on the purpose of the mechanism. This assessment tool was not being used solely for reporting purposes but rather as a diagnostic tool for me, the teacher and researcher. We were using the initial data to report on the children’s literacy development as well as to inform my own reporting which was then sent to my management. The assessment tool then could be specific to our learning situation rather than generic for the system. In this instance, the accountability of the project was through my interpretation of the results rather than through the results themselves. The tool itself, then, provided both assessment data and information about its usefulness as a possible assessment tool.

On reflection on the whole assessment process I decided to develop a checklist that could be used with the parent/caregiver while the child is playing rather than one that relies solely on my observations of the behaviour or performance of the child. I found that it was almost impossible for me to make my own anecdotal observations on the children because I was already balancing the teaching with the children as well as working alongside the parents to develop their understandings. However, by
working with the parents, I was able to spend time observing each child with them, thus making our combined observations much stronger and more detailed.

The final checklist was developed through a combination of discussions with parents, discussions with Early Childhood advisory personnel at the NTDE Alice Springs\textsuperscript{15} and using an assortment of ‘preschool to school readiness’ checklists (1988. NT. A Guide for Early Childhood Education, Preschool, Aboriginal Schools Version) and screening checklists (1994 Harcourt Brace & Co – ADSC – Australian Developmental Screening Checklist). The experience of the researcher as a remote area teacher and the experiences of other remote area classroom teachers also provided background on the skills the teachers would like the children to have when they started school. The checklist was also designed to give more detail to those identified ‘entry points’ to the First Steps Developmental Continua and the NT ESL Outcomes Profiles.

Another deciding factor with using a checklist approach was time. When assessing each child individually using a mechanism such as environmental print or the First Steps or Profile tools it was necessary to have the child engaged in specific tasks in order to then assess them. Our checklist was designed to use the knowledge of the parents in order to make a record of ‘where the child was at’. This was a response to the constraining factors of time and duty of care. I found it too difficult to focus on one child so intently when there were a number of children actively involved in learning activities.

In an on-going program, the checklist would also be useful in planning the specific teaching of, for example, using the toilet. In this situation, the discussion held between me and the parent was centred on not only the skills and knowledge of the children but on the home environment where children would be learning these skills. One good example is ‘has a favourite book that they ask you to read to them’. In every initial assessment done in 1998 parents indicated that the children did not have a favourite book. In discussions about this, parents said that they did not keep books at home and at none of the three sites was there a community library that could be accessed.

\textsuperscript{15} Noeline Laurie, Advisory Teacher, Early Intervention.
What was included in the checklist?
There were six sections to the checklist – life skills, reading skills, writing skills, hand skills, school skills and language skills.

Life skills
This section is a combination of typical school readiness checklists at use in Central Australia and some ‘real life’ indicators of fine motor skill development that are used in screening checklists. The intention of this section is twofold: to collect information for the teaching program to allow for specific teaching of skills such as using the toilet as well as to highlight with families that this is a skill needed to start school.

The indicators in this section are:
• Can use the toilet properly
• Can clean their teeth properly
• Can wash themselves properly in the shower
• Can feed themselves
• Can ask for food if they’re hungry
• Dresses and undresses self or uses fingers with food (developing fine motor skills in real life situations)

Reading skills
This section of the checklist contains indicators from the First Steps Reading DC (EdWA 1997) as well as indicators taken from the Aboriginal preschools checklist (NTDE 1998). This section is developmental in nature in that children will typically move along the indicators thus providing information about their reading development.

The indicators in this section are:
• Picks up books to have a look
• Knows which is the right way up
• Turns the pages properly
• Looks after books
• Tells stories about pictures in books.
• Knows that books have both print and pictures
• Talks about books
• Has a favourite book that they ask you to read with them
• Can read some labels on things eg coke
• Can read some of the signs around the community
• Understands that names and other words can be written down and read back
• Recognises own name when written

Writing skills
As with the reading section, this section is developmental in nature. It is possible then to mark the place where the child’s writing is typically developing. For example, a child will use a fist grip before they use a writing grip. This section combines some screening type indicators (Harcourt Brace & Co 1994) with indicators from the First Steps Writing DC (EdWA 1997).

The indicators in this section were:
• Puts the crayons in their mouths or crinkles paper
• Bangs crayons on paper
• Scribbles randomly
• Scribbles up and down or side to side
• Scribbles in lines
• Scribbles in circles
• Writes and draws with lots of different things - pencils, textas, brushes, etc.
• Holds crayons etc in a fist grip
• Holds crayons etc in a writing grip
• Does his/her own drawings
• Copies someone else’s drawings or scribble or writing
• Can do paintings - one brush one colour
• Can tell you the story of their drawing or painting

Hand skills
The hand skills used here came primarily from the Australian Developmental Screening Checklist (Harcourt Brace & Co 1994) and we adapted for use here in discussions between myself and the then Early Childhood advisor for the Southern Region, Ms Noeline Laurie who provided invaluable assistance in the development of this checklist.
Their inclusion were intended as a screening tool to highlight any developmental delay in this area. We also hypothesised that this would be a section that the indigenous children may be more competent in than others given that these were typical life skills for them rather than school type skills.

The indicators in this section are:
- Grips strongly with fingers and firm wrist
- Picks up and replaces small objects
- Shows which hand he/she likes to use for tasks
- Rolls, twists, kneads clay, dough etc
- Does jigsaw puzzles
- Threads objects
- Uses tools properly - digging sticks, scissors etc.

**School skills**
This list came primarily from my own experience as a teacher and through my readings and understandings of the new school culture that the children would be entering. I discussed this section with parents as I was developing it. The intention was to gain a small understanding of the development of the child’s ease of communicating with non-indigenous teachers as well as the development of some very typical school routines. In this section I used ‘whitefellas’ rather than ‘strangers’ as I was looking at a very narrow interaction that the children would be having – within the classroom and with a non-indigenous, non-family member. In all three sites, the term ‘whitefella’ means a non-indigenous person who is a stranger to you and is usually working in a bureaucratic function in the community. There are very few non-indigenous people who visit these communities in any other capacity.

The indicators in this section are:
- Can say hello to whitefellas
- Looks whitefellas in the eye when talking to them
- Will sit still and listen for a while
- Can pack up when work’s finished

**Language Skills**
This list was developed by me from my knowledge of language and literacy learning in the ESL classroom. It was intended to inform the teacher of the multilingual competence of the children and highlight their skills in this area.

The indicators in this section are:

- What languages are they learning to speak?
- What languages do they hear at home?
- What words are they using at the moment?

**How was the checklist used?**

Checklists were developed for three purposes:

1. to provide a tool that could be used in other indigenous before school programs in Central Australia
2. to provide a snapshot of the development of skills in the participant children within the project
3. to provide a stimulus for discussion with parents about school readiness and emergent literacy behaviours and assessment

Due to time and resource constraints, the children were assessed only once during the project using this checklist and the results of those particular assessments were used only by myself as the teacher firstly as a mechanism for giving direction in the teaching program and secondly for providing systematic benchmarks for gauging the impact of the project on child development, after the project finished.

As an assessment mechanism, the checklist was very useful as a discussion starter with parents as well as for the collection of individual information about each child.

**Faults with the checklist**

In using the assessment instrument I found a number of faults with its design. Firstly, when interpreting the results of the *writing skills* section, I identified a flaw. The indicators were intended to present a developmental pathway. However, the response to ‘no’ to ‘puts the crayon’ in their mouth could be interpreted in two ways. Either the child has not reached this developmental point as yet, or else has passed it. The results then need to be interpreted all together. The ‘can do it’ area of the graph actually shows the babies who have just begun to do this and the section ‘can’t do it’
shows those children who have passed this stage. Interpretation of collected data relies then on knowledge of the individual children rather than the response alone.

There was another indicator that I did not feel was very well explained and did not appear to elicit an accurate response; ‘copying someone else’s drawing or writing.’ I suspect that perhaps there was a negative connotation to this item and mothers were answering to ‘protect’ their child rather than by reflecting on their real development. I also found that this item was very obscure in its meaning and did not capture the initial intent of the item which was a typical writing development – copying words and pictures from around us.

**Usefulness of the checklist**

As with all of this research, things may have been different had I been local and indigenous. The particular assessment tool may have evolved to be something else. Its very format is as it is because I was visiting the community and did not have local and family knowledge of the children and their learning behaviours. The process of developing the tool proved to be very useful. This meant that I was talking about assessment with the parents and the school and gaining common understandings between the mothers and the teachers about what behaviours the children would need in order to make their transitions into school easier and their learning stronger. The discussion and the time spent with the mother observing the child, and getting the mother to think about the child’s literacy needs were important. Once again, it was relationships that were important rather than the formalised process.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have presented an assessment tool that was developed during this project. The discussion of its development, format and content has built on to the assessment theory review from Chapter 2.

The development of our checklist gave me as much information about the assessment process as information about the literacy development of the children. This assessment situation was a difficult one and, while this checklist was flawed in many
ways it did provide us with an invaluable mechanism for the teacher and the parents to really discuss the development of the children’s knowledge and skills.

In the next chapter I will move to present what actually happened, giving details on what we did with the more specific context of the realities of Central Australian communities and the literacy programs implemented at the three different sites.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY AND THE HISTORY OF THE LITERACY PROJECT
CHAPTER 5: THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY AND THE HISTORY OF THE LITERACY PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Having established the need for this research in Chapter 1 and having given the academic framework in which it was conducted in Chapter 2, I presented the methodologies of this research in Chapter 3 and more specifically, in Chapter 4, I presented and analysed the assessment instrument we developed. Now, in this chapter I will first set the specific context of this research, giving an overview of the communities and the families themselves. Then I will present what we actually did, telling the story of a typical bush trip and playgroup and presenting a history of the project in each of the respective communities. It is my intention to give the reader a taste of the dust of Central Australia to better appreciate the work environment of this project. Following this will be an overview of the literacy context and the program that was implemented. Together this will present a clear picture of where the project was implemented and what actually happened over the course of the project.
THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Where are the three communities?

Map 5.1 The Northern Territory and the three research sites

Community A lies within this area.

Communities B and C lie within this area.
THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Community A

The community

This is a small community of about 200 people living relatively closely to Alice Springs. In this community both Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English can be the first languages of the children. Families are able to access health and community services with relative ease. Services in the community include a one-teacher school with an enrolment that varies from nine to 20 and the local council office. This community has a CDEP program\textsuperscript{16} and an ‘Aged Care’ program.\textsuperscript{17} At the time of the project the Health Centre was in the process of being established. Families were at that time still travelling to town to access health services. There had previously been a childcare centre operating in the community but this had ceased after interest had waned and the building was vandalised. The community has been without childcare facilities since late 1997. At the writing of this report the council had plans for a new service. The school program caters for children from aged four until 12 at which time children must travel to Alice Springs for schooling. Many families in Community A choose to enrol their primary aged children in schools in Alice Springs and a school bus run to Alice Springs is in place. At the time of this research there was no preschool program or facilities at the school. The school accesses funding for a before-school program for the three to five-year-old children but has had limited and sporadic success with this.

My own snapshot of the social and political climate of the community is as follows. It is, to the best of my knowledge, accurate and has been compiled through my own discussions with local people.

This community has a reputation of being volatile and can be a very violent place to live. Despite there being some very strong individuals within the community who are working hard for their families the conflict between family groups leads to large arguments and fights. This community was established as a ‘welfare town’ in the 1960s to be a place where all the indigenous people from outer communities visiting

\textsuperscript{16} CDEP (Community Development Employment Project) is a program which replaces social security payments and communities can develop their own work projects. CDEP funding can be used by schools to create more Assistant Teacher positions.

\textsuperscript{17} CDEP workers run a facility and cook and clean for the old people.
Alice Springs could be relocated. All movement, income and education were controlled by the welfare system until the 1970s when people were ‘allowed to go home’. At this point the community greatly decreased in size. Some families chose to stay and consider the community their home. Other families who are the traditional owners of the country resent the intrusion of ‘outsiders’. This has led to a continual political struggle that results in fighting. Adding to this is the proximity to Alice Springs and alcohol and the resultant fuelling of an already volatile situation.

Leadership within the community seems to come primarily from within each person’s family group. There is a strong community council where people are elected and meet in order to make decisions for the community. The non-indigenous council administration then uses this mechanism for decision making. Unfortunately, because of the inter-family power struggles there is consistent dispute over any decisions which seemingly favour one family over the others. The traditional owners of the community also often disagree with decisions made by the council or the administration and lobby against them, sometimes through the legal system.

This continual arguing between families makes this community a hotbed of political intrigue.

The project families
While there were many children within the community, there were two main families who chose to be involved with the project. One, Brenda’s\textsuperscript{18} family, also consented to being interviewed for the project and this is presented in the case study. The other was a large family with many children. Both families were very keen to be involved in the project and really enjoyed playgroup. Both families were trying hard to make a good life but both were at times very dysfunctional due to alcohol.

All the women spoke English very well. Brenda’s mother had very little English literacy unlike her father who as a CDEP employee and council member was often reading and writing in English. He also enjoyed doing puzzles in the magazine

\textsuperscript{18} Not her real name.
That’s Life! for pleasure. The women in the second family were very confident and competent English speakers and their literacy ranged from nothing to quite high.

As said above, Brenda’s family consented to be interviewed about their own educational experiences. The backgrounds of the immediate family members of target students one and two are summarised in Table 4.1. Both parents attended from preschool to secondary school and both attended the residential secondary college Yirara for a few years. Brenda’s mother started out at the Lutheran mission community of N’taria. She didn’t attend school much because she had to look after her ailing grandparents, although she enjoyed school. Both of her parents were literate and attended school at N’taria. Brenda’s father said that he was forced to attend school in Alice Springs by the local community council. He would be beaten with a stick and refused food if he missed school and his family would be refused food and service at the local shop. He finally left school after being humiliated by being refused permission to go to the toilet. His mother is literate and attended school at Alekerenge but his father did not have access to schooling.

Both parents want their children to go to school and talked about sending their children into Alice Springs to go to school when they are older. Brenda’s father wants his children to have white friends so that they can share each other’s cultures and he saw that going to a town school would facilitate that. He will not send his children to Yirara College for secondary. He also made a strong point about not wanting to see his children grow up to become alcoholics and sees education as the way to help them ‘go straight’. He made the comment that ‘school is hard but it’s the first start.’
Table 5.1  Community A interview responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Relationship to child</th>
<th>Age at time of interview</th>
<th>Languages spoken</th>
<th>Languages understood</th>
<th>Did you get a strong education?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Western Aranda Eastern Arrernte English</td>
<td>Pitjantjatjara</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1&amp;2</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Eastern Arrernte English</td>
<td>Warramunga Some Pitjantjatjara Some of ‘everything’</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1&amp;2</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Warramunga Eastern Warlpiri English</td>
<td>Jingili Arrernte Luritja</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Community B**

**The community**

This community has a population of approximately 250 people and is 250 kilometres from Alice Springs. The local Aboriginal language, Anmattyere, is predominately the first language of the children with a small amount of English being taught to the children before they start school. The major instruction of English occurs in school. Services in Community B are the local Council, a Health Centre, a school catering for primary and secondary children, the local council, a store and a women’s centre. This community has a CDEP program. During the project a program catering to children under the aged of five was established in the school. At the time of this research the school did not have an official preschool program or facilities. There was no childcare service in the community.

This community was established to house traditional living indigenous people who had primarily been working on cattle stations after losing their land to pastoralists. There is still a strong ‘cattle station’ bank of knowledge in the community and the community run their own cattle. It is always exciting when the community gets the helicopter in to do some mustering before selling off a few head.

The community is a cohesive unit of extended families who at times argue and fight but this community is generally a peaceful and protective place to live. There are however regular occasions when alcohol is brought into the community and there
will be a few days of fighting when the clinic will be run ragged with tending to injuries and evacuations.

There is still a strong sense of leadership within the community. While I was working with these people I experienced the sacking of the non-indigenous council administrators who were rumoured to be ‘ripping off’ the community. The leaders of the community contacted ATSIC and the Local Government administrators in order to hold a meeting where these people were removed from their positions and expelled from the community.

If there are ever any problems within this community then there is an open-air meeting held and the issues are aired and discussed before decisions are made and implemented.

*The project families*

The participants from Community B were mostly women and children. Only once did one of the fathers come to playgroup when we held it out bush for the day. We have some great photographic record of him reading, drawing and writing and the children watching. Two of the mothers consented to being interviewed for the project.

Some of the women were literate in English and were doing tertiary study. Most of the women had very little literacy at all and at first were embarrassed about this and reluctant to do any writing or reading at all in front of me. Over time this changed and everyone enjoyed writing stories to make our books.

All the women spoke English very well. Table 5.2 summarises the language and education experiences of those families who consented to be interviewed as part of the project.

In discussing their own educational experiences and their aspirations for their children, the mother of child thirteen, who stated she had received a strong education, was adamant that at the end of primary school her children would go to boarding school and then to university. She wants her children to be able to meet people from other cultures. She saw that her children would come back to the
community and work as professionals, as health workers, teachers or nurses. The mother of child seventeen stated that she did not receive a strong education and wanted to keep her children at Community B for all of their primary and secondary education and saw that her children would live and work in the community doing jobs like picking up the rubbish and working in the workshop.

The first woman, who said that she had received a strong education went to TiTree School from preschool to year six and then went to Yirara College until she was sixteen. She said that she went to school all the time and had ‘great teachers’. She spoke of the issue of Aboriginalisation in the community and the need for the children to get a good education so that they can run the store or the office. Her mother, she said, went to school at Yuendumu but didn’t like it because the teachers were ‘cheeky’.

The second woman, the mother of child seventeen, has a very different story to tell. She said that she started school when she was ‘a little bit older’ and only went until she was twelve years old. She stated that although she learnt to read and write she was very unhappy at school because the teachers used to hit the children. She did not know anything about her own parents’ education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.2 Community B interview responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Community C**

*The community*
This community is a small homelands approximately 40 kilometres from Community B with one family group of about thirty people living there at that time. Electricity is generated via a diesel-powered generator and water is pumped from the ground. The community is often without power and therefore water.

In 1998 the Homelands Learning Centre closed and the children were then bussed daily to Community B for school, relying on one of the teachers from Community B’s school to pick up and return the children in the school’s troop carrier. This Homelands has no on-site services. Families travel to one of two nearby communities to access health services and stores. There is one public telephone in the community, which is usually working.

The Homelands was established within the homelands movement to assist families to return to their own land to live. This family has done that and this means that the fabric of their family is very strong. The ‘old man’ is the respected head of the family and decisions are made by him and problems are sorted out by him.

However, the isolation of their Homelands means that there is a strong reliance on vehicles and fuel in order to access basics such as food and health services. Also, the generator runs on diesel and so at times a decision is made to go without power and water so that someone can drive to Community B and get food and fuel.

**The project families**

I worked with three women in this community. Although I met the ‘old man’ at the start of the project and would sometimes get a nod across the way from him, I can’t comment on anyone else’s literacy levels. The women all spoke very good English but none of them could read or write very much at all, so that activities done with them about writing had to be ones that involved copy writing.

Note that the family of child 21 moved from Community C to Community B during the project but the interview was conducted at Community C and so I have kept it with that. Table 5.3 summarises the responses from those who agreed to be interviewed.
Both of these two mothers stated that they did not receive a strong education. The mother/aunty mother\(^\text{19}\) of children 18, 19 and 20 states that she went to school ‘everywhere’. She went to TiTree School at about the age of eleven but there was too much fighting and it was not a positive experience for her. She then went to Stirling School for a short period of time, about four months. She enjoyed that experience. She stated that she did not learn much at school because she moved around a lot. Her father did not go to school and he cannot read and write.

The mother of child 21 went to school in Alice Springs until she got to grade ten. She began school in a kindergarten that was held in a caravan at the Charles Creek town camp. For primary school she attended Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and Traegar Park Schools. Her secondary education was done at Alice Springs High School. She said that she got into a lot of trouble at school, had a very unhappy home life and found it very hard to learn. She was very emotional when telling the story of her education.

Both women want their children to go to school and get work after they finish. The first woman was very adamant that she wanted her children to learn more than she did. Her oldest son was away studying at Yirara College and was enjoying it. She wants her children to be literate and to be computer literate. She also stated that she wants her children to speak Anmattyere at home, to learn from the old people and to keep the culture strong.

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\(^{19}\) In these central Australian communities a child’s mother’s sister is also the child’s mother. It has become common practice for the term ‘aunty mother’ to be used with non-indigenous people for whom this is a cultural difference.
### Table 5.3  Community C interview responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Relationship to child</th>
<th>Age at time of interview</th>
<th>Languages spoken</th>
<th>Languages understood</th>
<th>Did you get a strong education?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18, 19, 20</td>
<td>Mother and Aunty Mother</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Anmattyere English Alyawarra</td>
<td>Warlpiri Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Central Arrernte English learning Anmattyere (married in)</td>
<td>English Anmattyere</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Summary of the interviews

Most of the parents of the children had attended school from about six to twelve years of age. Three of the parents had secondary education and of these, two of them were the only parents to state that they had received a strong education. Their own parents had had little education overall. Three of the parents spoke of unhappy memories of school but three of the other parents had been quite successful. With regard to the parents’ aspirations for their children, all of them wanted their children to have secondary education. Four of the parents were prepared to send their children away but two parents wanted their children to stay at their community. As far as their aspirations for their children’s long term future, only one parent expressed the wish for their children to go onto higher education or training, outside the community, in order to come back as a fully trained teacher, health worker or nurse. All other parents wanted their children to be able to obtain jobs within the community, whether it be labouring type jobs or skilled office work.

### THE LITERACY CONTEXT

**Reading**

At the three different sites I looked for what literature was available for the adults to read and what writing the children were observing the adults doing. In discussion time during playgroups this was a topic that I would bring up. I found that a lot of people, especially those aged over about thirty or so, were reading anything they could find but that younger people were not reading much at all other than official paperwork.
In all three communities it was my observation that there was not much reading material available anywhere. No community had a local library that people used, none of the shops sold magazines or newspapers.

Writing
Again what I was looking for was whether the children had any role models for writing. Were the adults writing where they could see?

In all three sites reading and writing were done in English. In only one instance did I see evidence of writing in the local Aboriginal language and this was being done by a non-Aboriginal linguist.

At Community A I have already noted that Brenda’s father enjoyed doing find-a-word puzzles. Apart from this I observed no other writing during the two years of my visits to the families and the community other than that done at the office. I know, from talking with other families that there is writing in the community but in other families. There are adults doing tertiary studies in the community – however, all their assignment work is usually done off-community. At Community B it was much the same except that we saw writing at the Health Centre and the school. At Community C I saw no writing by any adults at any time except for when the school was running and writing was done during class time. Once there was a linguist in the community doing some work creating children’s stories in the local language. In this case, the old man was talking and she was recording and transcribing.

Speaking English
All the women at the three communities spoke English with me and their own languages with each other except when I was a part of the conversation when a mix of both would be used. In discussions with the women they said that they spoke English on the community when talking with whitefellas who could not speak their language or when they came into Alice Springs. On two different occasions at two different sites a child was visiting who did not speak the local indigenous language of the other children and so some English was used as a lingua franca20. In both

20 The term ‘lingua franca’ is used when a third language is used to communicate between two people who do not have a first language in common.
cases, most of that child’s communication was through a woman who could speak their language.

**Language**

None of the participants said that they could read or write fluently in their own indigenous language. Two of the participants had some knowledge of literacy in their own indigenous language.

Everyone stated that they wanted the children to read and write in English because that was the language of the wider community and everyone wanted a strong education for their children so that they could be empowered and be able to live and work within both cultures. In addition, I could only speak English and the women did not want to make it too hard for me. For these reasons, English was the main language used in the project.

**WHAT WE HOPED TO ACHIEVE**

**Aims of the literacy project:**

As previously discussed, this project was designed to prepare children for school, to engage parents in early literacy activities and to gather information relating to the objectives of the project. The project itself has been reported on elsewhere (Bat 1999). Within the project, I undertook to do some research with the stated aims and objectives as follows.

There were two main aims of this project:

1. To inform the communities and schools of Central Australia, the Education Departments of the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth, and the various childcare agencies and organisations of the elements of ‘before school’ programs so that more informed and targeted planning can occur.
2. To highlight and develop the emergent literacy behaviours in 0-5 year old children in three Central Australian Indigenous communities.

The questions I sought to answer can be grouped into ‘looking in from the outside’ which implies the overall program implementation and organisation and ‘looking out

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21 See Appendix VI.
from the *inside*’ which means the day to day running issues and strategies. The specific questions I used to focus my research and findings are:

**Questions to be answered**

1. **Looking in from the outside**
   - What are the elements of the successful ‘before school’ programs in this project?
   - What does successful mean?
   - What do some of these programs look like?

2. **Looking out from the inside**
   - Can children whose first language is not a literacy-based language, develop emergent literacies when all reading materials are in English?
   - What do these emergent literacy behaviours look like?
   - What are some of the ways the children like to learn?
   - What kinds of literacy experiences do the children prefer?
   - How can you assess the ‘preparedness for school’ and early/emergent literacy development in participant children?

**ESTABLISHING THE PROJECT**

**What did playgroup look like?**

*A typical bush trip*

I always found that running playgroup was a feat of organisational skill. Not only did I need to ensure that my planning was targeted to the needs of the children and the families and pedagogically sound, but I needed to make sure that I had everything with me in order to be able to run the session.

Prior to this project I was the teacher-linguist at a bilingual school and responsible for coordinating the bush trips. I’ll never forget on a bush trip when the old ladies caught this big perentie. We were 40 kilometres up the road and 15 kilometres along a dirt track. Everyone was so excited and couldn’t wait for us to cook the perentie so they could eat it. We stopped at the waterhole where all the birds were that we had come to investigate. Out of the bus came the children and the women, the billy, the milk, the sugar and tea, the digital camera, the water, the crowbars, the muesli bars, the toilet paper but…no matches! The old ladies tried really hard to make fire but to no avail. I drove the 15 kilometres to the highway to try and flag down a passing
tourist for matches – but nothing! That perentie simply had to make the journey home with us. It was still good eating but nothing as yummy as it would have been if we had cooked it fresh. Just one little thing that I had forgotten to put in had meant that we had missed a great opportunity for teaching the little ones about cooking perentie – and we had no cup of tea!

So over the years I have learnt that a good memory, a list, and bringing everything that might be needed ensures a successful experience.

A typical trip for this project would look something like this:

From my office in Alice Springs I would go and sign out a troop carrier from the fleet and collect a purchase order book so that I could buy fuel out bush. I would then make sure the vehicle was fuelled up, check the oil and water and drive the troopie in as close to the office back door as I could. Already packed up in my office would be various plastic boxes of equipment – one for books and magazines; one with writing implements (old cards, textas, crayons, paper, list paper, pencils etc); one of ‘making things’ – scissors, glue, stapler etc; one of paint and brushes; one of ‘cuppa tea business’ – billy, tea, sugar, long-life milk, cups and of course matches and other boxes with anything else we needed for my planned visit. I would also take all the paper that we needed in a box or a roll. I would also need to take a case with all the paperwork needed for the trip – my planning, any resources I was taking to use or show and any reports. Sometimes I would take a laptop computer to do work at night time. And of course I had the digital camera, battery charger and disks – all in a hard case so that it didn’t get wrecked on the drive. Then into the troopie would go toys that I had borrowed from the toy library in town – big toys like little ride on cars, big blocks, slides etc. And last but not least was our round tarp, the main ingredient of playgroup.

So all this went into the troopie.
Then I would drive to ‘stores’ if the school had asked me to pick up anything of theirs and if I could fit it in the car.

Then I would drive to my house to pick up my bags, swag, food and water.

Then I would stop in at the supermarket to buy food to share with the teaching staff.

Then I would leave town – always aiming to be driving out by 10am.

To get to Community B or C I needed to drive for at least 2½ hours on mostly dirt roads. Usually I was by myself and the radio stops 15 kilometres out of town. At first I took music tapes but I soon discovered talking books and could get a good murder mystery in during the drive. The road wasn’t too bad unless it rained or I got stuck behind a road train and ate dust all the way, or if the road hadn’t been graded in a while. Still – the usual speed for safety was 80 km/h.

Always on driving into a community I would take a big breath and try to let go of my world-view on what things should look like. I always found it important to raise my eyes from the rubbish and derelict cars and machinery everywhere and see the families sitting together and living enriched lives. The times that I found hard were when there was alcohol in the community and its accompanying anger and violence. On arriving at Community B I would usually find that it was lunchtime and the council office was shut so I couldn’t sign in so I would drive straight to the school and meet with the principal, always making sure to take the teachers’ treats out of the car first.

My afternoons would be spent either meeting with the principal, working with teaching staff, visiting mothers or coordinating with the Health Centre. As I would stay at the principal’s house I would always have a good opportunity to fully discuss the program and its progress over dinner that night.

22 The small, remote schools in the Alice Springs region have a central depot where their purchases are stored for them to collect when they are in town. This means that if you are an adviser and are going out to a school it is common practice to ring the school first and find out if they have anything there that they need you to bring out. This can be anything from toilet paper to books to play equipment.
The next morning I would sit with Sally, the local Aboriginal Assistant Teacher who was running playgroup with me, and talk about how things were going and re-establish our working relationship. We would then look at what I had planned based on our discussion after the last session and we would discuss how we wanted things to go that day. Then, because Sally was a departmental employee she could drive the troop carrier and we would go around and pick up or remind the women that playgroup was on that day. At the beginning I would drive but it was always different when Sally drove. It reinforced her ownership of the program and my role as support.

Then we would drive back to wherever we were having playgroup, put out the tarp and unload all the boxes, placing them around the outside of the tarp.

After playgroup was over and we were all packed up again I would return to the school to do some work with them, talk with the principal, or just let them know that I was leaving.

After Community B’s session was over, I would drive the 40 kilometres to Community C and run a session and then drive back to Alice Springs. Sometimes I would stay another night at Community B and hold a morning session at Community C. The drive to Community C was always very beautiful but a bit rough as the dirt road was often in need of attention.

Arriving at Community C involved a short stop at the council office to sign in and find out if anything was happening that would impact on the program. Then I would drive to either the house or the centre where we had set up this week’s session. Each family was different and sometimes one family would not be there or there would be too much alcohol there for me to work and so I would try another family or go to the school. Usually I would run a playgroup session and then visit the school to work with the staff there – or the other way around. It was a rare day that everything went to plan!

Somewhere on the road after I left each community I would stop by the side and make diary notes about how the session went, what I thought about what had happened and how I felt about it all.
Arriving back in Alice Springs I would unpack everything, clean the troopie, fill it with fuel, return it to fleet and go home to my family. The next day I would write up the reports and begin planning the next trip to Community A.

I would be exhausted after each trip – not just from the driving but from having to switch cultures, worlds and realities so quickly and for such a short space of time. Although I got used to this over time I still found it very tiring.

Running a playgroup then was a lot more than just going to work and setting up the activity tables for the day!

**A typical playgroup**

A typical ‘playgroup’ evolved to consist of the following routine which was followed for all playgroups at all sites. I found it to be the easiest way to be able to both maintain a consistent routine for the children as well as to allow the flexibility of being able to run a playgroup anywhere.

- I drive around to see who’s home and to talk about having a home visit or playgroup that day. A time and a place are made for that day or the next.
- Everything is taken out of the troop carrier and the tarp is put down with all the boxes around the edge.
- Free play time with the toys brought out from town. I talk with the mothers about the day’s activity and get it ready.
- Everyone packs up the toys.
- Activity.
- Talk time.
- Everyone packs up.
- Wash hands.
- Fruit time.
- Story time.
- Pack up the troop carrier.

**SUMMARY STATISTICS**
This project involved a lot of different people from different organisations and backgrounds working together. In total, there were nine of us directly working to the objectives of the project with me being the central worker and coordinator. All other staff held their own position and directed some of their time and energy to the project. The two principals of the schools at the three sites (Community C had a Homelands Learning Centre attached to Community B) were involved in the project. The Community A principal sought involvement as a way of addressing what he saw as the social inequities in the community and for him to gain professional development through my advisory role in his school program. The principal of Communities B and C was more interested in the need for an interventionist program for the under 5’s in the community and she took a more direct supervisory role. The strength of her support and her ability to resource the program through submissions was one of the major factors in the success of Community B’s program. Both these principals were non-local, non-indigenous teachers who were also running their schools.

In Community A I worked with the indigenous assistant teacher but in an advisory support capacity within the school teaching program. She was not involved in the delivery of the under five’s program but did offer me advice at different times. At Community B I worked with two different indigenous assistant teachers over the time of the project, one taking over when the other chose to change her role in the school. At Community C I worked only with parents.

In Community B I also worked in coordination with the non-indigenous nurse and the indigenous health worker from the Health Centre.

The project ran over a total period of two years which included the establishment and reporting phases.
In total, this project had:

- 58 official playgroup sessions
- totalling 199 in-school days that included:
- 198 parent contacts and
- 92 Assistant Teacher professional development contacts (Although this formed part of the original project this is not reported on here.)

Two families, each with one child did not consent to participate in this research and I have not included their numbers in the figures above. They did, however, participate fully in the playgroups and were not disadvantaged through choosing not to consent to being part of this research. The personal characteristics of those who formally participated are presented in the following tables.

**The children by age and gender**

Firstly, the children. I have summarised the characteristics of the participant children by age as at June 1998 and by gender. Out of a total number of 23 participating children, the following information was gathered.

**Table 5.4  Children by age and gender as at June 1998**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ 2yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ 3yrs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ 4yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 4yrs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total girls</th>
<th>Total A =</th>
<th>Total B =</th>
<th>Total C =</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boys = 8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One girl is counted twice here as she moved from Community C to Community B. She is not counted twice in the final total but the totals for each individual community include her in both B and C. Consequently, I have calculated the percentages out of a total of 24.

**The children by language**
Another characteristic of each child was the language/s spoken in the home of that child. This was quite an interesting question to ask the families because it raised the question of definition of ‘speaking a language’. In every case, when enrolling a child in the program, when I asked the question ‘What languages do you speak at home?’ I was asked to clarify the question. In the participant communities there was a very complex linguistic environment within each family and within each house. It was possible to understand a language without speaking it. This was usually the case with a language of one parent who had come into the community from another language group. The children could understand their parent but did not speak their language. In other cases, the children were learning to speak all the languages present in the home. The information gathered and presented in Table 5.5 represents the languages that the child was hearing and learning to speak. It does not represent the full linguistic diversity surrounding the children.

Where the answer was qualified with ‘some’ as in ‘some Pitjantjatjara’ or ‘some English’ I have taken this as a yes and included it in the data.

### Table 5.5  Languages the children were learning to speak

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Monolingual speaker</th>
<th>Bilingual Speaker</th>
<th>Trilingual Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Aranda</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitjantjatjara</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central/Eastern Arrernte</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anmatyere</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warlpiri</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for each community</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals across communities</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# same 3 speakers; *same 2 speakers; ~ same 3 speakers; ° same 3 speakers; + same speaker

[Note that again there is one child who is counted twice – once at B and once at C]

**Participating family members**
Secondly, in reference to the personal characteristics of the participating family members, I have separated this information into two categories – who gave the consent for the child to participate in the project, and who was the active participant, i.e. the person who came to playgroup. This information is presented not in the number of people but in the relationship of the parent/carer to each child. Thus for a family of three whose mother brought them to playgroup, this counts as three in the data not as one. I have done this so that comparisons can be made across the communities. Two children at Community A had both parents participating equally in the project. I have marked this with an *. This information has been summarised in Table 5.6 showing quite clearly that for almost all children it was the mother/aunty mother who was responsible for bringing them to playgroup. In fact, for 88.5% of children this was the case.

Table 5.6  Participating Family Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in family</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Aunty Mother</td>
<td>10*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Two of these children had both mother and father participating equally in the project.

Number of playgroup sessions attended

The information presented here in Table 5.7 is the total attendance for each community. I have not collated individual attendance information although this can be found in the raw scores data tables in the appendixx23. In order to be able to make any comparisons it is important to remember that the project ran at the three different sites for different lengths of time. I have used the school terms as a method of averaging the data.

At Community B, once the women took over the running of their program and the record keeping, I stopped keeping these records as the program ran when I was not there.
Table 5.7  Number of playgroup sessions attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Number of sessions held</th>
<th>Total number of children across all sessions</th>
<th>Total number of terms</th>
<th>Average term contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE PLAYGROUP HISTORIES

Following is a short overview of what happened at each of the three sites – how the project was negotiated, how it ran, what happened.

Community A

The work done at Community A was conducted over a two-year period.

Initially, meetings were held with the school principal who is also the teacher, to negotiate the running of the project and what his needs were. A parent meeting was held, where seven mothers came and participated in an early literacy development workshop and discussions about the project. All the mothers agreed to try the playgroup and see how it went, and to consider being part of the research.

I then visited those families who were home at the time, sitting down and discussing the children and their needs and whether they wanted to think about the project and how they might want it to run, for example, playgroups or home visits or something else.

For the first six months, no other sites were running and so Community A received on-site visits for two days of each week. The usual visit format was for me to work in the classroom demonstrating, assisting or observing lessons; spend some time, usually morning tea, discussing the teaching/learning program and the implementation of new teaching strategies with the classroom teacher. Time was

23 See Appendix VII.
also spent with the Assistant Teacher, developing and implementing an Early Childhood program for the four to seven-year-olds.

Following the school visit, I would then run either a playgroup where mothers and young children would come along, or visit a family at home.

Initially, playgroups were run at people’s houses where a number of different families might come along. Sometimes, the playgroup was run with just one family and so developed into family visits. Playgroup was also held in the creek bed once and at one family’s homelands once, in the river bed there.

As Community A had a building where a childcare centre had been running, playgroup was moved into the centre and two of the mothers came to help clean it up. Initially, the reasons given for the childcare centre not running were because the building had been vandalised and no-one wanted to go there. Later, the woman who had been running the centre said it was because there were not many children coming and she lost heart - and also because the building itself was not very functional, even though the women had done a wonderful job in painting the walls and making curtains to turn it into a ‘little kids place’.

The centre was a very gloomy place, small and without a fenced outdoor place. This meant that not only was the inside not very inspiring or easy to use but that the children did not have anywhere safe to play outside and nor were there any outside play resources. We only ran three playgroups there before we decided to try the school.

The school principal, while supporting the project in principle, made it quite clear that he did not want any type of preschool program running in his school. Playgroup then could not be held in a classroom but was held on our tarp underneath the trees outside, or under the school on the cement when it was too windy.

Playgroup at the school was only held on three occasions. The decision was made by me to move back to home visits when only one family was consistently coming. This routine also gave time for me and the mothers to talk about what had happened since the last visit and what the children had been doing. Each playgroup session
also contained a planned discussion topic that I would talk about, including such topics as: what to do the next week; what did the children want to learn; what were the education experiences of the parents. These were planned and reported on for each playgroup.

After the first six months, the two other sites commenced and so visits to Community A became two days/fortnight for the rest of the project.

Playgroups had evolved into home visits and after six months, there were only two families who were receiving home visits. One family was a large extended family with four sisters and their nine children under the age of five; the other family was smaller, with three young children and later, a new baby. When the large family moved at the end of the first year, to live on their homelands, home visits then became centred on the project family remaining in Community A. I did visit the family that had moved to their homelands but found that the visit was considered to be more of a social occasion and the family stated it did not want to continue playgroup visits.

The school principal made suggestions about who I could then make contact with to ‘drum up more business’ but, as the other sites involved considerable travel, I made the decision not to ‘chase more work’ and so Community A became focused on the school and one family for the second year of the project.

On re-reading my field notes I felt again the frustration that I experienced in doing this work. Families were always very welcoming and the children excited about having playgroup. What I found difficult was the influence of alcohol on the families – sometimes I would choose to cancel playgroup for the day if there were too many drunks around and sometimes I would choose to still run it, depending on how many drunks there were and how strong I was feeling. Also, families were often simply not there because they were visiting or shopping. This meant that no real set time could be established at Community A and I could not tell ahead of time whether I would be doing the home visit or playgroup that I had planned and prepared for or not. This was very disheartening at times. My notes also reflect on the cross-cultural difficulties in running the project as a non-indigenous teacher who is not related to the families. Perseverance was the word and intention that came up very often in my notes.
Community B

Community B school expressed interest in the project after the initial call-out was sent. This interest was generated by the school principal with the support of the indigenous staff and the Sister from the Health Centre.

An initial visit and meeting with ten or so of the mothers was held along the same lines as for Community A, where early literacy was discussed, using the ‘First Steps babies’ as a tool to explain the concept of literacy being a developmental skill just as a baby learning to walk is developmental. I left the women with the offer of the project and gave them some time to think it over. A phone call with the school principal a week later confirmed that the women wanted the project to run at the school. One of the women working at the school, Sally, was released from her classroom duties to participate in the playgroups. From the beginning, Sally and I ran playgroups together, with Sally providing contact with the mothers and myself taking on more of a trainer role.

Playgroups were held for the first six months at the women’s centre. This was a suitable venue that had inside and outside space for us all and our tarp but was still only temporary, being ‘loaned space’. The women made the decision to move to the school in the second year of the project.

With the continued support of the principal of the school, the women moved the playgroup into the school and set up their own space in the wet area of the school. The principal sourced funding to buy some resources and the other teachers gave up their ‘wet area’ for the preschool program. Sally, and then her sister, Kaylene, who had also participated in playgroups, ran the preschool program, on a daily basis. I then took on more of an advisory role, giving help with programming and planning with a visit every two weeks. Different programming approaches were taken and Kaylene ran the program daily in the middle school session between morning tea and lunch. With the move into the school the number of mothers dropped but some still  

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24 In order to explore literacy as a developmental process, First Steps uses a graphic representation of a baby learning to walk. Participants put the pictures of the babies into order. I am a First Steps tutor and have used these ‘babies’ in many different workshops and settings.

25 Not her real name.
came. The number of children also dropped. Some of the children came to preschool without their mothers. Previously, when it was known as ‘playgroup’ all children came with a carer.

**Community C**

Playgroup at Community C started with the then Homelands Learning Centre teacher talking about the possibilities with the women. I went for an initial visit and it was agreed that playgroup would run for one session each visit I made and would be held out under the tree on the round tarp.

I visited weekly and then fortnightly, following the same routine and activities as had been done at Community B. Playgroup at Community C was smaller than Community B with usually only 3 participating children and with a maximum number of six.

Not long after the playgroup started at Community C, it happened that the Homelands Learning Centre closed and the children were bussed the 40km each day to Community B for school. Playgroup continued. When the school had been open, playgroup would run outside the school building and the school children would join in as time and lessons permitted. The older children would read with the younger ones, do paintings together and show the little ones how to use the new toys from the toy library that I would bring with me. With the school closed, playgroup became much smaller and quieter and more adult directed.

Towards the end of the project time, I started talking with one of the mothers, Valerie\(^{26}\) about whether she would like to continue to run playgroup after the project was over and I no longer visited. She was very hesitant because she said that she couldn’t read but I insisted and when I sourced some funding we ordered some equipment and boxes for the women to use to run their own playgroups. We talked about Valerie being in charge of the equipment. When everything arrived, we put it all in the school building and labelled it all. It was a very exciting day and all the community children helped. Valerie held a key to the building. To my knowledge, these resources have never been used to run a playgroup and Valerie herself has

\(^{26}\) Not her real name.
moved with her family to Community B so that her children can more easily access schooling. In this situation it was more my insistence than the community’s expressed desire to implement this project and so it failed.

**IMPLEMENTING THE PLAYGROUP PROGRAM**

In the general organisation of running the program there were some teaching elements that became the foundation of the programs.

**Role modelling**

*Teacher/Melodie*

I was always very conscious of my role as the teacher. Not only was I teaching the children but I was teaching the mothers about working with their children in this setting. This meant that my planning always encompassed not only what the children would be learning and doing but what I would be talking about with the women. It also meant that there was a particular style to my teaching, a very open and transparent methodology. By being explicit in what I was doing the women were able to learn how to do and then take over certain parts of playgroup in a relatively short time, despite not having had much experience beforehand.

*Parent*

When there was the opportunity, the reason and the materials to write, the women would - sometimes it was about their favourite football teams, sometimes it was stories for a book, sometimes it was their children’s names, or even to fill in forms – or assessment checklists. Many of the women did not have much literacy at all and so I developed strategies to scaffold their writing in order to provide role modelling for the children.

In discussing with the women their own education I found that nearly all the mothers had no schooling past about twelve years of age and that if they had then it had not been a positive experience at all. The one woman who had attended high school in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek had cried when we had talked about school. All the women said that they would like to be able to read and write better. None of them had attended preschool.
The implications of this were that most of them had very little if no experience of what little children do at preschool or in playgroup.

What it also meant was that the women themselves were perhaps experiencing learning through play for the first time. So when the women were playing with the equipment or doing a jigsaw puzzle or a painting they were not only role modelling for the children they were filling a gap in their own developmental learning or simply their knowledge of how to do something. For example, when we would do painting I would always insist on one brush one colour – that is, each colour pot had brushes in and you only used those brushes with that colour. I explained to the women that this is a common classroom practice and that it has the benefit of keeping the colours clear in the children’s paintings. I also explained that it can teach the children a bit of one to one learning. At the beginning, the women had only wanted to use one brush and clean it or not and it was through my modelling and talking about why I was doing it this way that gave the women the knowledge about how to organise little children painting so that they were able to participate in this typical school painting activity. One thing that we only discussed briefly was the connection to painting at home. Some women said that when family members are dot painting they keep their little matchsticks separate for the different colours.

The role modelling of the parents was a vital part of the learning process of the children and so it was necessary for me to ensure that we created and supported mechanisms for the parents to be able to do this.

**Older children**

When older children who were at school joined in with playgroup they loved to play at school and would set the little ones up as their students and they would be the teachers. They would also copy write anything that was written – either on the walls or in books. In these ways they were teaching the little ones school behaviour and literacy behaviours. Role modelling then could come from older children not just adults and it was important to sometimes have the older children in with us.

**Being explicit**
Not all learning occurred through the children watching; sometimes we explicitly taught the children new skills. When this was happening there were some definite strategies that the women would teach the children.

**Holding their hands to do something**
Mothers would hold the hand of their child to teach them about painting or writing, rather than talk them through it. This seemed to be a more appropriate way of teaching these skills. I saw this many, many times during the two years and can see that this is something that has implications for teaching young indigenous children in Central Australia – this is an important step in the learning process. I have no evidence on the effect of this step being missing from the learning process.

**Jigsaw puzzles**
We had a selection of both easy and harder jigsaws. This was another one of those activities that the women had not had much access to previously. However, this is not to say that the children were not developing the special skills that doing jigsaws encourages. This was another example of the women modelling first and then doing with the children by holding their hands and showing them before allowing them to have a go themselves. In many instances in classrooms I have observed this same ‘doing it for them’ behaviour and know that teachers interpret this as not wanting the children to fail rather than being a more appropriate teaching tool.

**Teacher as disciplinarian**
This was a time when I found my own position being used as a mechanism of authority with the children. So that the mothers themselves didn’t have to ‘discipline’ the children they would say that they had to do it because Melodie said so. After I had established my relationships with the different communities, families and people in the project, this use of my position to provide authority was something that occurred more and more frequently until it became an accepted teaching tool. This is discussed further in discussions about the disconnection between home and school.

**Seeing early childhood education in practice elsewhere**
At Community B we all went for a drive to a larger community approximately 40 kilometres away and visited their childcare program to see what kinds of activities
they were doing and what sort of equipment they had. At Community A we went on a trip to the Alice Springs Library in order to see what resources they had for the children.

These trips gave us a lot of good ideas and sparked a lot of discussion about the needs of the community and the realities of funding arrangements. Unfortunately, due to us not having much funding we were unable to repeat these trips. One way we got around this was to watch the video *Growing Up with Culture Strong* (Batchelor College 1998). This video is designed to take Aboriginal women through the steps involved in establishing a playgroup or childcare program on their remote communities.

**Cultural disconnections**

Critical reflection is an important part of action research. My concerns about the program being assimilationist gave me the strongest cause for constant reflection and research with colleagues, participants and other’s work. There was no doubt that the parents all wanted their children to learn to speak English, to become literate and to succeed at school. They all stated this clearly. They also expressed their determination for their children not to lose their culture within the dominant culture of mainstream Australia.

**The teddy bear hypothesis**

Walk into any shop, watch television, read a children’s book – in ‘mainstream, western’ society, Teddy Bears = Young Children. What do teddy bears represent in that culture? You cuddle teddy bears, you talk with them, you read them stories – they are your friends and protectors. When you are going to sleep, you take a teddy bear with you to keep you safe and make you feel protected. In my culture, teddy bears are cherished childhood friends, icons that are saturated with ethnocentric meaning.

Within the families participating in this project, there were no teddy bears. When I asked the women, no-one could ever remember ever seeing one in anyone’s house. Given the western use of the teddy bear toy then, were these children deprived? Were they crying at night for these missing protectors of dreams? These young
children who participated in this project were never on their own - someone was always with them, watching out for them, keeping them safe. At night they often slept together in one bed or in many mattresses joined all together. They felt safe and protected. By each other, by their families and by their dogs, but never by a teddy bear.

At school, many of the big books had teddy bear characters. Not only were these characters unfamiliar to the children but so were the narrative style of the stories. Even the popular numeracy equipment of the moment includes ‘teddy bear counters’. This difference between home and school is more than just a gap it is a wide desert canyon patrolled by teddy bears.

The questions for me here, then, are:

If the young children of Central Australia do not have teddy bears, is early childhood education closed to them?

Is the provision and use of all things teddy bear assimilationist in its very nature?

In order to pursue these questions, Kaylene, from Community B and I designed some lessons around teddy bears. I then went to an op shop in Alice Springs and asked to buy all their teddy bears. Interestingly, the response of the manager was one of ‘those poor children without teddy bears’ and so we got twenty odd teddy bears for very little money.

We then used the big book of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, songs about teddy bears such as Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, turn around…, all the books with bears from the school library and various other activities such as sorting and ordering all the toys in order to watch the children’s reactions to these toys. We even played a circle game where each child cuddled a teddy bear and then passed it on – we had to show them what to do first. The bears were a novelty at first and the activities were fun and having the bears gave more meaning to the various activities but no magical attachment to the toys was formed. The Teddy Bears were not a magical key to the development of literacy in the children. It was, however, the explicit recognition by myself and Kaylene that a lot of the teaching was based on a culture unfamiliar to the children that gave strength to her teaching. We talked with the children about the
teddy bears and what they were, they got to experience them first hand and gain some understanding of this other culture that was operating at school. It is this specific exploration of the other culture operating within the school system that helped to demystify the teddy bear culture. The ‘solution’ was not to simply give each child a teddy bear.

In answer to the two questions that I posed above:

1. Without the specific acknowledgement and exploration of culturally specific icons such as teddy bears, much of the early childhood teaching materials will be less available to the children. However, the children do not lack any form of development and growth as a result of not having teddy bears and so the teacher can ensure that learning occurs without knowledge of all things teddy bear.

2. If teddy bears are used in the teaching/learning situation as an acknowledged alien cultural precept then their use in the classroom would not be assimilationist. However, if teddy bears are used so as to make up for some perceived lack in the children then yes, their use would in fact become assimilationist.

My ‘Teddy Bear Hypothesis’ then is this:

For the indigenous children in remote Central Australia to make a successful transition into school can be facilitated by the introduction of the children to the world of teddy bears. This needs to be an explicit teaching process that explores cultural difference openly. In this way the culture of school can be opened up and explored so that these young children are not left guessing.

IMPLEMENTING THE LITERACY PROGRAM

In order to promote literacy in the home there were a number of strategies I used.

Encouraging reading at home

One strategy was simply to give the families story books to read with the children. Some of these books were donated, some bought, some we made. None of the bought, published books lasted more than the week before my next visit and I never saw any books that the families had bought themselves. Those books we made that
had photographs of the families and were laminated and heavy duty stapled were the ones that lasted.

Another strategy I tried was to give the families laminated photographs of their children with their names on them to stick up on the walls. This was a relatively successful strategy. With one family, I noticed a library appear on the walls of the house with the original laminated photos – the new baby’s birth certificate and articles from the local newspaper about the father who was a football hero joined other pictures on the wall. The name flashcards that did not have photographs did not make it onto the wall. Discussions with the family about where to keep books so that they were out of reach of the dogs and with the local CDEP workers about some shelving never eventuated and it was this ‘wall library’ that gave the family permanent reading materials.

I also instigated a trial with the local store at Community B. As there was a very limited stationery supply at the store and no books, magazines or newspapers, I approached the storekeepers who gave us a $1000 cheque. I then went shopping in Alice Springs and stocked the store with an assortment of books, pencils, toys, magazines etc and kept a list on a data base. Each visit over a period of a couple of months I would check in with the store as to what was selling. Some books, pencils and textas sold with the more expensive children’s books being bought by a family from a different community who were passing through.

Despite the initial reluctance of the store to stock magazines and newspapers these were the highest selling items. In fact, the relieving storekeepers sold these items with a less than usual mark-up and couldn’t keep up with the supply. When Sally and I had done the initial talking with the usual storekeepers they were very reluctant for us to buy magazines or newspapers because ‘nobody in this community reads.’ Sally was very upset by this as she and a number of other community members were in fact undertaking further study and training and many community members were literate and interested in current events. It was sheer luck and coincidence that these storekeepers were on holidays and the relieving staff was more supportive of our attempts to get literature into the community. Both the usual storekeepers and the relieving ones were non-local and non-indigenous. However, they were all experienced remote Central Australian community workers who had worked for...
many years in many different communities. My diary notes at the time reflect my frustration and consternation at the power and impact of a decision made by the store managers employed by the local community to run their store. My frustration also lay with their need to make a profit outweighing the need of the community to access reading and writing materials.

At Community B, as a direct result of the project, the local Health Centre developed their own library corner with children’s books and toys and magazines for the adults. Some of the books made during the ‘Targeting Early Literacy - Family and School’ project were kept here and had in fact become ‘favourite books’. At first we spiral bound the books with each page being laminated. The Health Sister reported that these books were too flimsy and so we heavy-duty stapled them. This made them not only dust-proof but strong as well and lasted a lot longer.

Introducing writing with the mothers

As a way of encouraging the women at Community C to write I handed over responsibility of the ‘roll book’ to them. This meant that they had a list of the children’s names in front of them if they needed to copy them and this gave them an opportunity to be in charge of the group and role play school behaviours. The women at Community C added their own names to the list and kept track of which mothers came. This roll book lasted only for a couple of months but was an effective tool for encouraging the women to write.

At all three sites the women and I wrote stories together that I made up into books. In all three sites the process was the same:

1. We did something all together such as making damper on a bush trip.
2. We took photographs and I had these developed / printed.
3. Next session everyone would look at the photographs and talk about them. I would suggest ways to make them into a story.
4. We would split the photographs and story up and different women would write different pages.
5. I would take away the photographs and the writing and make up a book.

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I am unsure if this is still the case.
It was at the point of 3 and 4 that the role modelling for the children occurred. They would be part of the discussion about the photos and they would watch and ‘play write’ while the women were writing.

On a number of occasions, though not regularly, I observed the younger mothers writing notes about their favourite football teams, graffiti almost, during playgroups. My observation was that this seemed like common writing that they were doing outside of playgroup. This and the doing of puzzles in magazines were the only examples of ‘writing for pleasure’ that I observed.

**Speaking English**

We did not have any formalised approach to the teaching of spoken English because the women were translating everything for the children and we did not have the consistency of lesson times to introduce a structured oral English program. The children then were learning literacy behaviours rather than ‘English’. They did however hear their mothers and myself speaking English and would try out words and phrases with me as the project progressed. This actually helped to encourage the mothers to take on the teaching role with their children as there was not an easy oral communication between the children and myself.

**Introducing writing with the children**

As previously discussed, one mechanism I used to create a need for writing was the creation of books.

The provision of the writing materials at the ‘have-a-go’ spot on the tarp or in the room was another very important aspect of the program. We gave the children old paper and birthday cards and shopping lists and envelopes and school work books and pencils and crayons and textas and they all had a go at writing. This was part of their play stations time when they could choose what they were doing and so they would move from one activity to another.

Through the availability of these materials that the children usually had no access to at all I was able to observe the development of early writing behaviours in a number of the smaller children. During one visit to Community C I was talking with a mother about how children learn to write and that chewing the crayon and scribbling
was a great start. When her 18-month-old did just that not ten minutes later and we were able to capture these behaviours on the digital camera she could see just what we were talking about – that learning to write was something that children ‘grew in to’ not just something that started at school and that she could have an impact on her child’s learning.

**Children’s English names**

In order to create a need for the adults to write, I tried different mechanisms. One was the roll book as previously discussed. I also asked the adults to write the children’s names and dates on any paintings, drawings or writing that the children did. What we found when the women went to do this was that the names that the children were using with me were their designated ‘English’ names, which was considered the most appropriate name for the situation. Often, the women were unable to spell the children’s names, either because their own literacy levels were low or because there needed to be some discussion as to how to actually spell the children’s names as this was likely to be the only time apart from birth when their English names were written by their parents.

For example, at one site, three of the girls were named ‘Ellie, Linda and Cheyenne’. The first time that their mother wrote their names she wrote ‘Aellie, Lind and Channe’. So as not to ‘shame’ her about this I used the roll book as a way to ask about the girls’ names and how to spell them. The first two were easy – there are accepted English spellings and we agreed to use those. The third one however caused any amount of difficulty in working it out. In discussions with the school and the Health Centre nurse about how to spell this little girl’s name, we got two different versions – ‘Chayenne and Cheyenne’ and it seemed that not until she went to school would the spelling of her name possibly be sorted out.

In my own teaching experience and in the teaching experience of others working in Central Australia, this is a common occurrence. The usual story is that a child comes to school with an unusual name and there is much discussion about how to spell the name. There are often a few variations until eventually one becomes more prominent. This, more than anything else, reinforced for me the huge difference between the experience of the children and what was expected of them when they
started school. After all, what is the first thing that is taught to children at school or preschool if not how to read and later write their name?

More on names – again, at all three sites, I found that the children would take ownership of the first letter of their name. Not in the western way of ‘That’s an L. That’s for Linda.’ but through a personal ownership of the letter itself – they wouldn’t name the letter but would call the letter ‘L’ ‘Linda’. There are implications for teaching in this. Firstly that this provides a wonderful way of introducing written letters, by using the names of the children and giving them ownership of that letter. In a classroom working with eight year olds who were working on stories, I have heard children helping each other with spelling use this technique – for example, when spelling ‘just’ they would say ‘start off with James’.

The other implication for the classroom is that, by convention, the first letter of a name is in capital letters. This means that as the children tune into the first letter of the names as their way of learning letters, they learn all capital letters. This is the opposite way to the usual teaching practice of beginning mostly with lower case letters and introducing capitals as the next step.

**Encouraging the children to read**

All the children participating in this research encountered their first reading experiences during the project. At the beginning, I would read a story at the end of playgroup so that it became an accepted activity. Then sometimes I would ask one of the mothers to read a story but they usually declined – either because they were too shy or because they couldn’t read, or because they just didn’t want to. Then I started talking with the women about reading with their children and how to hold the child in your lap to read. We have photographs of the first time one of the little ones at Community C read a story with his mother. She had to hold him still in her lap and make him listen to the story which she began to read in English. When it became obvious that he just wasn’t interested she started talking about the pictures – in this case horses – and talking with him in his first language. Then he became interested in the story, because he could understand what his mother was saying and because there were horses locally and so he could relate to the story. After he had been playing for a while, one of his older brothers came and read him a story and he sat with him and really enjoyed the story.
Early literacy in English rather than in L1

The term L1 stands for ‘first language’ and in this situation may refer to one or more local indigenous languages that the child is learning to speak.

This story of the little boy reading with his mother for the first time highlighted for me the situation we were faced with – the children at Communities B and C all spoke an indigenous Australian language as their first language and only spoke a few English words. At Community A most of the children spoke Aboriginal English as a first language, as well as their local indigenous Australian language.

However, all the books we used were in English, even the ones we wrote ourselves. At all three sites I spoke with the women about this issue and at all three sites they said that they wanted to do the playgroups in English. The reasons they gave were again the same across all three communities and included that there were very few books written in their own indigenous language and they did not have access to them. At Community A there had been some work done on children’s books in the local language but these were not available anywhere in the community. At Communities B and C there was a linguist working on writing down children’s stories in their language during the time of this research but there were no other books available.

All reading by adults then was done in English with the reader often translating or discussing the story in the child’s first language. This of course involved some high level language skills on the part of the adults and the children. The adults were reading in English but thinking and talking in the children’s first language. The children would read in their first language when they were reading a story, even though that book was written in English. This was particularly evident when they were reading a book that we had made ourselves. Writing was a similar situation. When the adults were writing – either names, or in the roll book, or writing a story to make into a book – this was all in English. When the children were writing, they would role play the act of writing but their writing would all be in their first language, apart from when they were writing their English names.

The impact of this anomaly in their literacy journey is one of the key elements of this research. Can we expect role play reading and writing from children who are
developing early reading and writing behaviours in their first language which is not a written language? Will this impact on their literacy learning in English? The only child participating in the research who began school during the time of the project was Brenda, from Community A. One of her first languages was English and so this was not an issue.

The bilingual schools in the Northern Territory cater to this issue by teaching literacy in the child’s first language and oracy in English. They then transfer the L1 literacy knowledge to English through their primary school years until by the end of Year Six most instruction time is solely in English.

There were no bilingual programs at any of these three communities – all three schools were English only programs where the local language is used to explain concepts, to translate instructions and for some specific programs. All literacy is in English.

Are the children then learning that literacy belongs only to English? Is this a bad thing?

**PRINCIPLES LEARNED ABOUT LITERACY IN THIS CONTEXT**

It was my observation that very little reading material made it into people’s homes.

At the end of the project, Sally commented to me in discussions over the content of that project’s final report that they had one book in their house, a book made during the project called ‘Making Damper’. Her daughter was coming home from school each day and asking for that book to be read to her. Sally said that she had to ‘hide’ the book away so that it didn’t get taken and lost. This came after 18 months of the ‘Targeting Early Literacy - Family and School’ project running in the community.

Something that came out of the research was my concern that rather than ‘spreading’ literacy into the children’s homes so that they could have role models for reading, we were in fact reinforcing the structure that reading belongs to whitefella institutions – books were either given out by me or belonged to the school or the clinic. Very few books belonged to families.
No community had easy access to books and magazines. When we set up one shop to sell magazines and newspapers at reasonable prices, they sold out. This shows without doubt that the Aboriginal adults of these communities want to read but lack materials. In my own experience, Aboriginal people in Central Australia love to read magazines. However, with none to read and therefore with very few people in these communities reading and writing for pleasure, is this enough for the children? If they only see people competent in functional literacy will this impact on their own literate lives? What of the semi-literate adults who always rely on the workers in the office or school or health centre, who are often non-indigenous to help them fill in forms and read letters? Will this impact on the literacy of the children? I would say that the answer to these questions is that without adequate supplies of reading material and with no adult role models for valuing literacy (Dunn 1997) then the children will not see real purpose in reading and writing and in fact that this is what we are already seeing in the low literacy levels.

**A literacy learning model**

As a way of clarifying for myself what I was potentially seeing in this learning situation I devised the following diagram 1 to help explain the shift from Oracy in L1 to Literacy in English without Oracy in English being the starting point. This situation is also unique in that there is no local community literacy in the child’s L1 to use to develop these emergent literate behaviours.

*Diagram 5.1  A literacy learning model*
COMPARING THE THREE SITES
Table 5.8 summarises the characteristics of each of the three programs in terms of resources, participants and programs.

Table 5.8  Characteristics of the three sites
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources in the community that we used</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Council</td>
<td>School Health Centre Shop</td>
<td>Three women at different times and their children. Sometimes the older children would join in when the homelands school was running.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A few women at the beginning, evolved to two main family groups with fathers and uncles participating if home. Main contacts were mothers and aunties. Children aged from babies to five years of age.</td>
<td>Mothers, Aunty Mothers, some grandmothers, one father once. Children aged from about 18 mths to 4 years old.</td>
<td>Children aged from babies to four years old.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did the program look like?</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initially playgroups. Evolved to home visits with playgroup held on the tarp in the front yard. Playgroup in the creek bed.</td>
<td>Initially playgroups. Evolved to official preschool program at the school. Playgroup in the creek bed.</td>
<td>Playgroups held under a tree on the tarp. Playgroup in the creek bed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What other things did we do?</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made some books. Visited the Alice Springs Library.</td>
<td>Made lots of books. Set up a library at the Health Centre. Stocked the shop with literacy materials and tracked sales. Health promotion officers worked from within playgroup twice. Made a video about going to the dentist at Community B. Visited the childcare centre at a nearby community.</td>
<td>Made some books.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who ran the program?</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MB</td>
<td>Initially me, then I trained two workers who ran the preschool program at the school.</td>
<td>MB</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where did the resources come from?</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I brought everything with me from town.</td>
<td>Initially I brought them from town. The school sought funding and resourced the program.</td>
<td>I brought everything with me from town.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHAT WE ACHIEVED**

**Looking in from the outside**

The first aim of this project was to inform the communities, schools and relevant agencies of Central Australia of the elements of ‘before school’ programs. This was achieved in part in the completion of the literacy project ‘Targeting Early Literacy –
Family and School’ and in the subsequent publication of the report. This publication of this research will disseminate information about the project and should stimulate discussion about this topic amongst literacy and early childhood specialists in Australia. At the end of 2002 the Northern Territory developed a strategic plan for Early Childhood education. Currently, small schools do not have adequate ‘before school’ programs in place and Utopia School is in the process of developing a mobile preschool. The use and application of the knowledge contained within this project however cannot be guaranteed and it will be in part due to my own further writing and publishing that will hopefully help to stimulate the discussion and consideration of this work.

Looking out from the inside

The second aim of this project was to investigate emergent literacy behaviours. This is a very new area of research in Australia and indeed internationally. Currently there is very little else available – most research and writings are about ‘looking in from the outside’ rather than ‘looking out from the inside’ and tend to be about observed indigenous culture rather than from indigenous education contexts. I have found some very interesting things to do with emergent literacy in this particular context and, as a teacher, can see immediately their implication for teaching practice. These findings informed the research done here and form part of the findings presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter I have presented the actual implementation of the playgroups and the literacy programs, both from a pragmatic view point and in relation to the specific objectives of the Targeting Early Literacy Project. The intention of this chapter was to present a clear picture of the realities and practicalities of this work.

In the following chapter I will present the major findings of this research and discuss each point in turn.
CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS
CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION
Reflection was always a large part of my work and it is in this chapter that the greatest objectivity was required. As a participant observer within this research it was necessary for me to be clear about my own point of view and its basis in my own ethnicity when interpreting findings in the light of previous research. This has been a complex undertaking and clearly I can never be completely separate from the work.

In this chapter I will analyse the findings of this research, working from the basis of successful strategies and then extrapolating to guiding principles that can be applied in this context. Finally, I will compare and contrast the three different sites in order to gain insight into what makes an effective program and why.

Successful strategies will be discussed under the topics of generating participation, maintaining the focus and sustaining the program against the odds. I will then detail the evidence I found of the children’s learning. Finally I will move to the issue of effectiveness, using the topics – determining effectiveness at the session level; determining effectiveness at the program level; fostering community participation and sustainability.

GENERATING PARTICIPATION
For the most part in teaching, the first step in the teaching/learning process is to assess the students – where are they at, what do they know, what do they need to learn next? These are standard questions used across all teaching situations. Then it becomes a question of deciding on the outcomes you are wanting to achieve and then finding activities to support this learning.

As with the rest of the project, the teaching/learning process was not so clear cut in this case. Firstly came not assessment but rather relationship building and finding the students.

The following findings are taken from my analysis of my field diaries and reports. As discussed, there is very little written in this area and these guidelines or tips even, will present an invaluable resource to others working cross-culturally in this field. In
all communities and across all visits the following strategies generated the most participation.

**Fostering relationships**

Firstly, the most important first step in this project was that of building relationships with the families, the communities and the organizations. It took time, perseverance and experience. I had to balance developing this relationship with professional detachment. As a non-indigenous, non-local, non-family member I had a specific role when working in these communities and it was important for the work, for my own self and for the communities that this relationship be developed within defined limits.

During the two years of the project, the work waxed and waned but always kept going. Now, later, I still meet up with families and talk. I have even taught some of the women who have taken up further study. Our discussions always start within the boundaries of our defined relationship and go from there. This is consistent with previous research (Harris 1992; Christie 1992). This is my defined role – teacher and someone who is interested in the children. We do not talk about other things happening in the families because I am not close enough to be included in that. However, when I see families from another community where I lived and worked for three years our talk is about the children and their education and all about who has had babies and what’s been happening generally – because my relationship with those people has a different definition.

This was an important thing – to know what my role was as an outsider coming in and finding the balance between professional and personal needs is something that takes time and experience.

Relationships are a two-way thing. Not only was I getting to know the families and their children but they were getting to know me. I found that the longer I worked with them and the more positive experiences we shared the more the families welcomed me.

I interpreted this in this way. In the beginning, my role in the community and therefore my relationship with the families was of a new type and not defined. For
example, I wasn’t a school teacher working in the school; I wasn’t a nurse, or a shopkeeper. I didn’t live in the community. I didn’t have a set work place. I wasn’t like the dentist who visited only once/year. I was a bit like the health promotion people who visited every couple of months. But these people often changed. I kept coming back regularly. My role was different. It was of a new kind. The longer I came, the more defined my relationship became and the better able people were to relate with me as they could work out where I fit, who was responsible for working with me and whether the work we were doing was worth it.

I found a good place to start when beginning to build relationships was to talk about my family and show photos. This helped the families to be able to place me in my family and then place me in theirs. This focus on family relationships is reflected throughout the work and reflected in the children’s literature preference.

**Communication**

Another important aspect of keeping relationships clear and strong was that of communication.

**With the community**

Firstly the broader communication with the community. I found it was important to stay visible and in people’s minds. Driving around, writing letters to the council, sending faxes before a visit, making phone calls, putting children’s work in the store or the health centre, even having playgroup outside, all these things helped to keep my work open and visible.

Driving around was a very important part of the communication process. This let everyone know that I had arrived; it allowed people to see what was going on. After a while people recognised me and the troop carrier and would yell out to their family that I was there and to gather up the children for playgroup. Sometimes Sally would drive around at Community B before playgroup (because she was a government employee she was allowed to drive the car, whereas at other sites we were restricted by regulations). This not only meant that she could talk with people and ‘round up business’ but the metaphor that she was driving was very important and was a contributing factor to her and her sister taking over the driving of the program.

**With the families**
Secondly there is the communication with the families and the people themselves. I found that even with some years of working in a remote community I still had miscommunications at times. Not just not understanding a spoken word but also in the finer reading of the situation. For example, one day when running playgroup at Community B we were sitting outside the women’s centre. The children were playing and the women were talking and also playing when I realized that I had missed a whole communication and something serious was happening. At first I thought it was something to do with playgroup and looked to see what was wrong. Then I made myself sit quietly and unobtrusively and watch and listen. I soon realised that the people sitting about 50 metres away were signing with the women and something very serious was happening. It was obviously centred on one particular woman. So I moved quietly to sit with one woman not directly involved and whispered to her what was happening? She then told me that someone in this woman’s family had passed away. I knew then to just sit, keep my head down, be quiet and wait. Soon people were coming to shake that woman’s hand and everyone left and the wailing started. I quietly shook the woman’s hand and told her that I was sorry. Then after everyone had left I packed up the equipment and left.

The knowledge of how to communicate in Central Australia is something that comes from experience and from keeping an aware and open mind.

**With agencies and the system**

Thirdly came the communication with the various agencies and with the system. As previously discussed, the project came with its own bureaucratic process that was a given – implementation plans, school visit reports, end of semester reports – these were a mandated part of any project work undertaken in Central Australian schools at that time. As a specific part of the project I created playgroup plans that included intended outcomes as well as a ‘what really happened’ section. Final reporting of the project as well as conference papers and presentations all used photographs. All throughout the project I found that this visual medium was the easiest and most effective. Snapshots of the children’s learning provided a valuable cross-cultural mechanism. I did of course obtain permission for the use of each photograph that was used in any published form. This level of reporting working from the visual/oral/cross-cultural context to the written/usually same-cultural context proved itself a challenge.
Knowing how to communicate cross-culturally is very important in this kind of work (Malin 1997). I found that my experience and my networks were so very important. I had other teachers that I could discuss the work with who knew what I was talking about and who could offer advice and support but often the best advice I got was from the women themselves. In fact, this talking through playgroup issues provided the best and most accurate data about what was happening in the playgroup.

**Professional detachment**

Balanced with relationship building must come professional detachment. While relationships are the cornerstone of my work, I had to ensure that I did not become emotionally dependent on my perceived success of the work. When things were seemingly not working so well I needed to be able to persevere and remain a constant source of support and information for the families I was working with. Knowing and understanding my relationship with the community made this somewhat easier but there were still times when I found the work very hard and the poverty, ill-health, disempowerment and dysfunction of the communities overwhelming.

I found detachment to be important when working cross-culturally because there was often a cross-over in experience that my own ethnocentricity defined in one way but it was not intended this way. For example, if I arrived to run a playgroup and found no-one there then initially I felt disappointed and wondered if I had done something wrong. Although this could have been the case, in most instances it would simply be that something else was happening and people were busy. As the project progressed in time, this happened less and less because my relationship with the communities became stronger and the women were more comfortable with discussing things with me.

**MAINTAINING THE FOCUS**

In order to keep our focus on both the children and the early literacy activities it was important to both minimise distractions and maintain maximum interest through culturally or personally relevant activities.

**Attending to the learning context**

*The big round tarp*
I used a big round canvas tarp to define our playgroup space. We could have done this with an ordinary tarp or a blanket. Our big round tarp was fantastic - we had it specially made from swag tarp. Sitting on the mat was something that the schools were expecting the children to be able to do when they started and so it was something that we could teach the children. Using this tarp allowed us to be able to define our playgroup space no matter our location. In discussion with some mothers and with another teacher, I found that some mothers use a blanket in the same way – to make a ‘kitchen table’ on the floor/ground and use this as a way to encourage their children to sit on a blanket to eat meals.

This tarp also gave us the flexibility to be able to hold playgroup anywhere – from a more formal school setting to a creek bed. The tarp itself gave the children the connection into the specific learning situation.

**Participant restrictions**

*Keep the playgroup closed to unplanned visitors*

When unknown whitefellas came along, if they were unknown or disliked, the dynamics changed to such an extent that the program was completely interrupted. Unfortunately, one of the realities of working in remote communities is that agencies often don’t coordinate and often turn up unannounced or just pop in when coming out for something else. Given that it takes quite some time to develop relationships within the playgroup and the cross-cultural communications require constant attention, it is not surprising that such visits can be negative. Planned visitors however proved to be a very rewarding experience for everyone.

*Encourage parent participation*

Parent participation was something that I raised with the families very early on in the project when we talked about how things would run. I said that I did not want to do child care and everyone agreed that we would make this rule. In reality, there was always at least one carer with each child, usually a mother, sometimes a sister. The only time we had men in playgroup was when I would do a home visit and then the men would sit to one side and watch but not participate. At Community A, Brenda’s father was particularly interested and would talk with me before and after a session.
but not during. What I found with this rule was that by having this rule clearly stated from the beginning we were able to access the family rather than only the child and in this way new knowledge and experiences were spread further. For example, when one of the mothers at Community C told me how much the grandmother had enjoyed the book we had made and how everyone was reading it, I realised that without that connection I would not have known that.

**Timing**

*Work to school times where possible*

We always tried to match our session times with those of the school so that we started and finished at about the same times. Not only did this help prepare the children for the realities and routines of school but prevented us from being overtaken by the school children when they finished for recess, lunch or after school. It also allowed us to join in sometimes with the younger children at school for some activities.

*Find out about cultural events*

It was an important aspect of the communication within the project that I knew to ring before a visit and check up on whether there were ceremonies going on, or funerals that meant that playgroup would not be able to happen.

**Local control**

*Let the women take control*

As playgroups developed I handed over more and more of the running of the group as the women learned the routines and become familiar with the activities – I would ask them what they wanted to do and then organise it. This also validated their roles as the teachers of their children which was the more culturally appropriate thing to do. This was also about letting go of control and becoming more of a facilitator than a teacher. In my experience this is often a difficult thing for a teacher to do and requires some thinking and planning. In our work, once the women watched me for a while and then helped me do things, and then they became more confident about taking over first bits and pieces and then the whole thing, as was the case at Community B.

**Food**
We always had good food and it was always supplied by the project. We were never able to find funding to provide this basic element of the project. Discussions with the women reinforced that we needed to have only good, healthy food at playgroup. The reasoning behind this was reinforced the day that the children brought in lollies, soft drink and chips and the children’s behaviour became erratic and difficult to deal with. The children did not achieve much at all that day. This was a good learning in itself.

**The nature of the activities**

Some activities were run by me and were directly related to the culture of the school that the children needed to learn in order to be better prepared for starting school. Other activities were more about just learning and were directed by the women. Sometimes we managed to combine the two.

**Of cultural relevance**

*Making damper*

On a bush trip, the women made damper and the children watched them, coming in and out. At the end the little ones tended to come over and whack the damper with a stick to get the ash off. This is all they were allowed to do at this stage as making damper is a culturally significant activity and has rules attached. I observed that when creating something the children would often just come in at the end of this type of learning.

Making damper is a culturally significant event in Central Australia and I do not pretend to be able to represent the complexities of the process here. What I wish to present in Diagram 6.1 is that the children’s learning of this process started at the end rather than the beginning.

**Diagram 6.1 Making damper**

![Diagram 6.1 Making damper](image)

Scale:
- Done by the women. They may involve the children to do things like get the flour or the wood but this was always the older little children.
Definitely done by the women with the children only watching.

☐ The little ones are allowed to have a go here.
☐ Everyone does this.

This has implications for teaching when things tend to start at the beginning with the materials and then go to the end. Here the important part was at the end. Another implication for learning may be that when we give the children free time with construction materials they will not want to build anything because we are starting at the wrong end of the activity.

Making biscuits
As a follow on from making damper, this was a great sequencing lesson that we did at Community A. The children were allowed to handle this dough whereas they weren’t allowed to touch the damper dough. They mixed and rolled and stamped and cut the dough and then we cooked them and everyone got lots to take home. Washing hands was a focus as well.

Playdough
Using playdough gave the children the opportunity to get their hands on some dough and just play. However, when it came to actually making something, again, the children all watched their mothers who were making things before they then made something with them and then finally had a go themselves.

Of personal relevance

Photo Albums
We kept our photos in special albums that had space for writing next to them. Again this provided an opportunity for the women to have a real reason for writing. If all the women could write was to copy the children’s names from the roll book then that’s what happened. Where to keep these albums was always a discussion point because everyone wanted access to them. We always got double prints so that people could have copies of the photos to take home but we also ‘lost’ lots of photos at times. This showed again the importance of the visual record and of family.
Digital camera
Not only was the digital camera great for photos for books but ours had a play back feature and a screen. This was very useful for showing mothers what behaviours I was observing in the little ones and helped them see the progress that their children were making.

Making books about familiar people and places
In each site the most popular books were always those with photographs of people that the children knew. They would always pick up these books to read and be read. While I tried a number of different of genres, in particular recount and procedural, this seemed to have no effect on their popularity, it was the people in the story that were important.

Familiar processes
Bush trips
A number of times we took all the equipment and cuppa tea supplies and went somewhere nice in a creek bed or to a special place. Not only did this strengthen relationships because the women shared their stories with me but it got us away from anything that was going on in town. On one of our bush trips one of the old ladies caught a goanna and cooked it on the fire and this became one of the learning stations for the children.

Visits to other communities
As stated before, we did not have much funding for visits to other places and I actually found that this changed the dynamics of the group. The children and the women all became quieter and closer together because we were going somewhere that was possibly not their country and therefore, as visitors, they were required to be quieter and respectful.

A model
By following familiar processes and routines we created a situation which allowed for culturally appropriate teaching / learning processes to emerge. Because the
children and the adults were able to do things in their own way it was in turn possible to keep the focus on the activity itself.

From observing these activities I began to see some patterns to the way that the children were learning new things. When a child was learning a new task, something often quite small, there were definite steps that the children often followed. Following, in Diagram 6.2 is a representation of what I observed.
I saw children learn this way when doing jigsaw puzzles, when playing with toys in the creek bed and when reading or writing. It highlights the absolute need for both role modelling and the space to have a go. It also raises the question of holding the child’s hand to do something. In western culture mothers talk their children through activities such as jigsaw puzzles or drawing. With the families in this study the ‘expert’ could be anyone who knows how to do the activity and is a family member for that child. This means that for children in classrooms or playgroups without someone from their family there who is role modelling for them, how do they know when to start learning?

The most common model used for ESL teaching in the Northern Territory is this:

Diagram 6.3 ESL Teaching Model
The main difference between the teaching model and the learning model is that missing step of explicit one on one instruction. Again, when teachers in classrooms see the Assistant Teachers ‘doing the child’s work for them’ or ‘taking over’ they instruct the Assistant Teacher to allow the child to ‘have a go by themselves’. But what if this is negating an appropriate learning/teaching methodology? This could impact on the learning of the children in that it interrupts the normal flow of their learning.

### SUSTAINING THE PROGRAM AGAINST THE ODDS

#### Flexibility

*Follow a routine*

Flexibility is tied in very closely with routines. By doing things the same way each time I was providing the role model. For example – with fruit time – I always washed my hands first and made a bit of a deal that I was doing that. I always put the fruit in the bowls, I always got the mothers to wash the children’s hands, and I always got the children to sit in a circle around the edge of the tarp and gave them the bowls. I always insisted that they sat still to eat.

*Opportunities for one to one*
When there were times when everyone else was away, rather than cancel playgroup I would take advantage of the one to one situation with a mother and use it to get to know her better. In this way I got background information on the family and child and strengthened that all important relationship. This also gave us opportunities for discussing the child’s learning and for doing assessments.

**Perseverance**

What with meetings, sorry business, drunkenness, cultural responsibilities etc, people were often unavailable or unable to participate. This was the greatest challenge for me and something that is a real consideration when developing programs that rely on outside agencies and expertise. People and organizations are always seeming to give up and declaring the situation hopeless. By persevering and letting people know that you won’t give up on them you are sending them a message that, in some part, may help them pull themselves out of any slump that they are in.

**Be prepared to make changes.**

While constancy and routines were important in order to create a more structured and effective program, we also changed venues, methods and activities, often trying to respond to what was happening around us. For example, when one family that I was working with at Community A said that they were going to move to their homelands and how we should go there to have a playgroup, we did. And it was a very successful day. This is another case of needing good communication. In this example the suggestion was posed very tenuously and could very easily have been ignored if I didn’t want to pick it up, thus saving face for everyone. However, after we had that day together at the homelands I found that there had been a subtle change in my relationship with the family and they were a bit more open to me and to the work. It was also important for me to remember to wait for people to respond and to feel comfortable in making suggestions about things to do. This was another case for taking our time with things. I found that by using the tarp and the routine of playgroup as our constancy we had more freedom and could respond more readily to ideas than if we were confined to a classroom type situation.

**Contacts in the community**
I always made sure to have a contact in the community - the office at Community A and the school at Communities B and C. When I signed in at the office at Community A I would get the gossip on what was happening in the community. With Community B I got this from the school principal at whose house I used to stay. With Community C I would ask the women about what was happening. As time wore on they would tell me more and more. For example, if one of the women I was working with or her family was really drunk then I knew what I would find when I went to her home if we had planned a home visit. Or if there had been a death then I would know to either not go to the house or to use the appropriate behaviours – speaking quietly and saying how sorry I was and then I could ask what we should do about playgroup. Sometimes it would go ahead and sometimes we would cancel it all together.

**Clarity of expectation**

*Boxes for everything and everything in a box.*

We had sturdy boxes that were for reading books, writing paper, writing implements, paints and all the tools that we needed. We taught the children to always put the right things in the right box, making the packing up time part of the day rather than a rush at the end. This clarity of expectation was important. The children were already working with me in a language that was new to them and so having things be obvious to them helped them to better participate and learn.

*Clean up and pack up - every time.*

We always made sure to pack up between activities and to clean up properly at the end. Not only did everyone learn how to pack up and to clean up but they also learned about school routines and expectations.

**EVIDENCE OF THE CHILDREN’S LEARNING**

Just what the emerging literacy skills of the children would look like was one of the focus points of this work. I will present here a number of behaviours that I observed that showed that the children were developing literacy skills. In the section on assessment I will present a more detailed discussion on how I came to decide which kinds of behaviours I was looking for.

**School-type behaviours**

*Packing up*
The packing up was something the children did not know about at first but by the end of the project they would take over the packing up and do it themselves sometimes. This was a school-type skill that they were unfamiliar with but that they developed and would assist them in making the transition into school.

**Painting**

All the children who participated in this project became familiar with the routines, mechanics and freedom of painting. This involved just what equipment we would need, how we set up the painting area and how to move the brush between the paper, paint and water with confidence. None of these children had any experience with hands-on painting before participating in this project.

**Routines**

The children in this project became familiar with the routines of playgroup, able to predict what was happening next and have confidence about how to approach certain tasks eg sitting in a circle. All these skills were ones that they would need when they started school.

**Use of equipment**

Depending on their age, the children became familiar and confident with equipment such as scissors, glue, and sticky tape – all essentials for an easy transition to school.

**Emergent literacy behaviours**

**Writing skills**

**Have-a-go Writing**

In every situation, every time an adult was writing, if there were writing materials available, the children would sit down at some point and have a go at writing as well. When no writing was being done by adults it was unusual to see the children having a go at writing.

**Sticks in the dirt**
One 18-month-old took different sticks and put them in order from shortest to longest by sticking them into the dirt. This was evidence of sequencing and was play from home rather than learnt behaviour, giving evidence of the overlap of learning.

**Reading skills**

*Lap reading*

The little children didn’t know what was expected with lap reading so I got the women to actually hold them still, talk about the story and almost force them to listen. Then they realized what was happening and they settled in for a minute and focused on the book and the story. Because there were no or very few role models for reading and what to do with books we found that this was an important step. This also took the children beyond the beginning stages of reading, past the reading-like behaviour that could have become ritualized without development.

*Book knowledge*

All the children who participated in this project exhibited behaviours that showed they had developed knowledge and skills with books. The level of skill depended on age and development. A two-year-old then might pick up a book and ‘read it’ upside down whereas a four-year-old would read from the front. Some of the children came to recognise some of the books that they were reading regularly and these became favourite books.

*English names*

While not all children could recognise their written English name it was accepted practice that the children would have their names written on their work and the children all came to see this as part of the process itself.

**The use of visual records**

Some of the most useful data collection and analysis came from photographic records. Many photographs were taken during the course of the project and the digital camera came to be a very important tool. When you use a stills camera in ‘the bush’ there is the week to two-week gap for the processing and transporting of the photographs. With the digital camera it was possible to play back photographs with parents and discuss the learning behaviours of the children right there. These
photographs then became part of the children’s files or part of the books that we made.

To further assess what the children knew at Community B we ran a one-day ‘playgroup out bush’ and, using a digital camera and a video camera, photographed and filmed the children throughout the day. These particular photographs provided a rich source of information for me to discuss with the parents and teachers just what I thought I was seeing. This information was not used for individual children’s assessment but rather to provide information about how the children were learning. Should the project have continued then these photographs would have been used to provide further evidence of achievement using the checklist items. At the time, however, this was not done.

Throughout the project the use of visual materials was vital in assisting communication between English L1 and L2 speakers – the photographs, books, videos, posters and PowerPoint presentation all used photographs to illustrate particular learning situations.

Evidence of the children’s learning was gathered throughout the project. In order to gain a deeper analysis and understanding I did a case study of one of the participating children.
THE CASE OF BRENDA

I am presenting this case study of Brenda in order to provide a medium term view of the development of the literacy and school skills of one of the participating children. This case study encapsulates both the social context of the program and the literacy development of Brenda and was taken over a two-year period.

Bibliographical information
Date of Birth: 04.10.94
Family living at Community A:
   Father
   Mother
   Sister (10), self (4), brother (2), sister (baby) (as at 15.12.98)
   Grandmother
(Brenda also has a big sister and a big brother living with family at another community. They sometimes come and live with them as do two of Brenda’s father’s brothers and some of their children who come and live with them.)

Languages
Brenda is learning to speak Arrernte and English.
Languages spoken at home: Western Arrernte, Warlpiri, some Pitjantjatjara and English.

Health history
When Brenda was a baby she had pneumonia and had to stay in the hospital. She only had one major illness and her family now sees her as a very happy, strong and robust young girl.

Contact with project
In 1998, Brenda participated in 15 playgroups and home visits. She started school in April 1999 and then I visited her family regularly to talk about her progress at school. I was also still working with the school staff on the literacy program and so had regular teacher contact with Brenda.

Family education history
Brenda’s father, mother and father’s mother all agreed to be interviewed about their own educational experiences and aspirations. This was detailed in Chapter 5.

**Brenda’s mother**

Briefly, Brenda’s mother can read and write English and she wants all her children to go to school and to learn to read and write.

**Brenda’s father**

Brenda’s father can read and write English and wants ‘well-trained, educated children’.

**Brenda’s grandmother**

Brenda’s Grandmother is multilingual and did not get much education at all. She cannot read and write.

**Brenda’s literacy journey**

Brenda started playgroups with me in February 1998. Playgroups were then being held on a blanket and were focussed on getting to know each other. We made things together and read books and I would leave books behind for everyone. By May we were trying to run playgroup at the old childcare centre. Brenda’s mother came and helped me to clean it up first. In June Brenda started doing some writing with her mother showing her to write her name by holding her hand. Brenda started scribble writing from the very beginning of the project. In early May she was randomly scribbling; by late May she had started to form the first letter of her name. Brenda was reading books each week at playgroup and taking books home where her brothers and sisters read to her. By September 1998 Brenda could read some known books by herself, she knew the front of the book, where to start reading and how to turn pages. Playgroup had by then evolved into home visits and I was visiting once or twice a fortnight. By the end of the first year, Brenda’s parents were reading to her and had stuck newspaper cuttings, certificates and family photographs on the wall to read. They found a place to keep the books for the children and by this stage they had started to teach her to count to ten and to write the letter for her name. One
of the school literacy strategies – ‘the writing bag’ was accessed by Brenda’s big sister and she and Brenda have been writing together. Her sister’s story for school told of her mother doing schoolwork with her sister Brenda at home. When I visited the family at home we put the tarp down with activities for the children and we talked about what the children were learning and how everything was going.

In March 1999 Brenda’s father went to the school to ask could his daughter please start school now because she was ready. Her first story at school consisted of letter like formations and lots of ‘B’s for Brenda. There was no picture. She was able to tell her story which was ‘After school I went home and fell off to sleep.’ Within a month she was trying to copy the teacher’s scribed story written at the bottom of the page. Her writing then constituted all recognizable letters that were the first letters of the children in her family, all written all over the page with some of the letters being circled. There was still no picture.

The teaching staff reported that she did not have any troubles starting school, that she was comfortable with the routines of the school and with the idea of reading and writing. Her family was very involved with her start at school and I was still home visiting regularly with the family and the other children. At each visit we talked about Brenda’s progress at school and how she was feeling about it all and whether there were any problems.

Her first report card for Semester 1, 1999, lists her attendance as 75% and profiles her against the NT ESL Profiles as:

- **Reading**: Consolidating Beginning Level 1
- **Writing**: Achieving Beginning Level 1
- **Listening**: Achieving Beginning Level 1
- **Speaking**: Achieving Beginning Level 1

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28 The ‘writing bag’ is a First Steps strategy. The school children take it in turns to take home a back pack that contains reading and writing materials and an instruction card for parents. When they return the bag to school their stories are read to the class and they receive a reward such as a sticker. The intention is to encourage the children’s writing and the family’s participation in their learning.

29 In reality, these profile levels mean very little. However, they do indicate that Brenda was achieving well for transition and was certainly level with her peers.
The teacher commented that she was ‘already up to Transition level’. In conversations with the teaching staff it was clear that Brenda was not the typical student for the school and that she had made rapid progress.

In September 1999, Brenda started to draw a picture first and then write her story underneath the picture. She was consistently writing the initial sounds of the first two words of her story and then single letters in a line to represent the rest of the words. For example, her story ‘I played mud fight.’ is written as ‘I P S W I O Y Y P M I’ Her picture is still not recognisable.

At the end of 1999 Brenda’s attendance at school started to drop off and the teacher contacted me to see if I could talk with the family about what was happening. They told me that she had been baby sitting her little sister and helping her grandmother do the shopping. Her mother said that she liked to help around the house doing things like hanging up the clothes. After we had talked a bit more they said that maybe she had been missing school because she had been ‘sulking wanting a bike’ and that the washing machine was broken and she didn’t want to go to school because her clothes were dirty.

Her father took her back to school and talked with the teacher about what has been happening and Brenda started to go to school more regularly.

At home, her dad said that she had started to try and do the puzzles in his That’s Life! magazine. He also said that she was practising writing the first letters for her name and for the names of other people in the family.

At the end of her first year at school, Brenda was able to role play write and had begun to move to phonetic spelling. She was a happy reader and loved school. However, her attendance was becoming erratic and in discussions with the teacher, he felt that because the project was winding up and my visits were beginning to get less and home visits had officially finished, that the family now did not have enough support to keep sending her to school. The family also told me that they would like more visits and playgroups but we had been unsuccessful in finding funding to keep things running. I left this issue with the community council who continued their attempts at finding support and funding for childcare and family support.
Brenda’s emergent literacy behaviours
The development of Brenda’s emergent literacy can be summarised using the same categories presented earlier in this chapter.

School-type behaviours

Packing up
Brenda learnt very early on in the project that we packed up the boxes when we had finished. She took a leading role in this activity. When she started school she was very comfortable with this routine.

Painting
Brenda was able to participate easily in the painting activities when she started school because she understood the equipment and routine.

Routines
Brenda became familiar with the routine of playgroup very quickly and translated this new knowledge into the school forum with very little difficulty.

Use of equipment
Brenda knew how to use almost all of the equipment that she found in the classroom when she started school.

Emergent literacy behaviours

Writing skills

Have-a-go Writing
There was a very clear and progressive development of Brenda’s writing from scribble to using the first initial of her name to using the initial sounds of words.

Sticks in the dirt
I did not observe Brenda sequencing using sticks, however I did observe her telling stories with them, with other children and her mother and sister.

Reading skills

Lap reading
I observed a number of occasions when Brenda sat in her mother’s lap to read but this was not a regular occurrence but was more something that was done as part of playgroup.

*Book knowledge*

Brenda engaged with books from the first contact with the project. In our second session together we made books together using magazine cut outs and plastic zip lock bags. Brenda was familiar with the parts of books and began school with that knowledge.

*English names*

Brenda spoke English as one of her first languages and came to recognise it in written form very quickly. Her mother would write her name on her paintings and help her to write her own name. Her big sister also helped her to learn. When Brenda started school she could recognise her own name and write the first letter.

*The use of visual records*

The photographs of Brenda at playgroup and at school were an important source of information about her development and an important tool to use in discussions with her family and teachers.

*Is Brenda typical?*

My immediate response would be that no, Brenda is not a typical participant of this project. One of her first languages was Aboriginal English, unlike most other children. Her father is quite literate in English and does in fact read and write for pleasure, unlike most other families who do not have access to any reading or writing materials. Brenda also had contact with the project for the whole two-year period, most of that time being home visits where both parents were participating in different ways.

However, there are many other factors that Brenda shares with the other participating children. Her Aboriginal culture was the foundation of her and her family’s life. She was very confident within her family setting to play and learn. She did have a non-literacy based first language. She did suffer from hearing loss and general ill-health.
Alcohol and violence often affected her home life. She did not have every day access to reading or writing play experiences.

In fact, I took Brenda’s early success as evidence that the project could work with children given more time and exposure. This was highlighted for me the day that a little baby at Community C put his first crayon in his mouth while the other children were drawing, and the day he first sat with his brother to hear a story. That little boy did not speak English at all, his parents were not reading and writing and his only contact with the project was every couple of weeks when I would visit. However, his mother, his aunty and his school-aged siblings who were all there all understood that he had just taken his first step on the literacy journey.

**DETERMINING EFFECTIVENESS**

In order to determine the effectiveness of the program I have looked beyond Brenda’s individual development and beyond the catalogue of skills developed by various children. I have looked at effectiveness from both the session level and from the program level; from the micro to the macro; again from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in.

**DETERMINING EFFECTIVENESS AT THE SESSION LEVEL**

As presented earlier, one of the elements necessary to maintain focus was the use of culturally or personal relevant activities. These activities served to both minimise distractions and maintain maximum interest so as to keep the purpose of the project at the forefront – to develop literacy skills in the children. The determination of effectiveness of various strategies was itself a developmental process. Some activities that we tried worked well and some didn’t, some worked in some places some times and not others. My guideline was to give something a go and see how it went. Following are some teaching strategies with a discussion about why they were helpful or successful or why they were not.

*Make a library at the health centre*

All the books that we made at Community B were kept at the Health Centre. The sister also put out magazines and some toys. In discussions with her she pointed out
that just about everyone in the community was a regular client at the health centre and it was a good place to keep things. She was right. The books that survived were ones where the story was written by the women themselves and they became known as that person’s book. The one book that got wrecked was the one that I had written. This library worked for two reasons:

1. people wanted to read the books
2. the Sister and the Health Worker both strongly supported the project and maintained the library

Use catalogues for cutting and pasting
Catalogues have not only pictures of real things like toys and food but they have the name written underneath it somewhere so for women who had low literacy levels, they could still copy the word of the picture onto a chart or onto a child’s work for them. The children had no experience with scissors or glue so it took a few lessons for them to begin to get the hang of it all. Again, catalogues were real life things and the children preferred to read them to the books that were about fairy tales and about things that were too far removed from their own lives.

This strategy worked for two different reasons:

1. the children could relate to the items in the catalogue
2. the women could use the text to copy

Borrow the toy library toys
Each visit I would bring different big toys – ride-on toys were always very popular. The children loved these and it gave them a choice to play on the toys or to come and join in the unstructured writing/reading activities on the tarp. As funding was always hard to come by we utilised the local toy library and borrowed toys from their mobile program. The issue of resourcing is a big one. Not only was it difficult to find just where we could get money but because we were attached to the education department we were ineligible for lots of different commonwealth funding. Turning over the big toys through the use of the toy library was a successful strategy because it brought in new toys that presented the children with a new learning experience.

Buy hard card books
I found that the hard card books were much more resilient and portable in the harsh central Australian climate than any other bought books. I did have difficulty at the time finding enough in the places where people would shop when they came to town but I am pleased to say that has changed in the past twelve months and places like Woolworth’s now stock more of these early books. The children really loved them because they could pick them up and turn the pages easily and if they got thrown around they didn’t tear too easily. It was also possible to wipe the dust off them. In this case, the resources were appropriate for the harsh climate.

*Do butterfly painting*

When doing painting I asked the women if they knew how to do butterfly painting and each woman in each site was familiar with and enjoyed this activity. This was a good opportunity to do something familiar that the women could control because they had the knowledge.

This strategy worked because the women knew what to do and could easily run the activity without any input from me. This created a more relaxed learning atmosphere with more teaching / learning interactions between mothers and children.

*Read to the children*

We had a set story time and get some books with Aboriginal characters - eg Ashton Scholastic Reading Discovery series. Not only did this bring the children into the world of stories but began to prepare them for school where it was expected that they would sit still for story time. At the beginning I modelled this reading aloud for the women who often had never had this experience as children and then got them to take over reading to the children.

This activity worked because the children became interested in books and stories. The books with Aboriginal characters were still stories and people that were unknown to the children and so provided a link between the photographic based real stories and the made up narrative stories of school.

In summary, then, activities were successful if they supported people to have a go at learning no matter what their previous experience or literacy. This support was given either through people or resources.
It got to be quite easy for me to tell if an activity was working or not, simply by how everyone was responding to what we were doing. In looking at some of the things I tried that didn’t work, it was the activities that were the most removed from the lives of the children and their families and that I had the most control over that were the least successful. If an activity had no relevance, either personally or culturally then, while everyone was still prepared to ‘give it a go’ it was very quickly obvious that people were not enjoying it and learning was therefore minimised.

_Make flashcards for home_

One of my ideas was for us to make flashcards of people’s names or names of things, like doors, and for the women to take them and some blue tac and put them up at home. Although everyone participated in the activity at playgroup and we played some games with the cards no-one to my knowledge ever put them up at home or even kept them. Writing without familiar visual context was of itself not useful.

_Cut & Paste into initial letter_

As a way of reinforcing each child’s letter we did some activities on initial letters of names. While this provided great practice at gluing and staying within the lines it did not provide any reinforcement of the child owning that letter. Again, it was too far removed for them at that point.

_Give away books_

I collected books from as many sources as I could and gave them away. There was never any evidence of them being kept for any longer than that moment and they became consumables. This reinforced the concept that these ‘outside books’ were of no relevance really. They were full of strange ideas, concepts and language and the only Aboriginal story books we had were stories from other places. This only served to reinforce that this book thing was something that whitefellas did.

**DETERMINING EFFECTIVENESS AT THE PROGRAM LEVEL**

Firstly – what is ‘effectiveness’? In terms of the project itself and the expectations of the NTDE, effectiveness included:

- Improved literacy outcomes
- Best practice teaching of early literacy by teachers
- Assisting parents in a range of effective early/emergent literacy activities
• Working collaboratively with parents fostering understandings of the purpose…literacy activities

NTDE expectations centred on preparing children for school, specifically through their exposure and experience with early literacy and their familiarity with some school routines and experiences. Working with parents was included as a means of fostering literacy understandings in the children. The project itself then is all about early literacy.

I have added the following two criteria for effectiveness. The rational underlying their inclusion will be dealt with in turn.
• Fostering community capital
• Sustainability

The second, third and fourth dot points about effectiveness were achieved through the way that the program operated and the methodologies I used. Most of this has already been discussed in the section about effectiveness at the session level. Working with parents will be covered in the following discussion about community capital.

The remainder of this section will focus on three points:
• Improved literacy outcomes and preparation for school
• Fostering community capital
• Sustainability

**IMPROVED LITERACY OUTCOMES AND PREPARATION FOR SCHOOL**

As was explained in Chapter 4, I developed a new instrument to assess early literacy development and school readiness because none of the established ones captured the earliest stages for such young children of non-English speaking background.

**In terms of early literacy experiences and preparation for school**

All three kinds of programs were successful according to the NTDE criteria in that all participating children experienced early literacy exposure and all participating children...
children were documented as showing some early literacy behaviours and some familiarity with school-type behaviours. All children who participated in this project started out with very minimal if any exposure to or skills in reading and writing.

A cross section of participant children was assessed for the development of before school early literacy development and preparedness for school. In fact, out of the participating 23 children, all except for six children from Community A were assessed using the project checklist (this will be presented in the following section on assessment) and one child; Brenda was assessed using the First Steps DC and the Northern Territory ESL Profile.

The assessment data collected is presented in the following tables and figures. Table 6.1 provides an age and gender profile of those children who were assessed for the project. There were in total, four children from Community A, six children from Community B and six children from Community C who were assessed.
The children

Table 6.1 Profile of assessed children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Age at assessment</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.0*</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*DOB was unconfirmed and age is approximate.

The information is presented in graph form in Figure 6.1 to provide a clearer indication of the spread of ages across the program.
It will also be useful to represent the spread of the ages of the children in the following way in Figure 6.2 in order for this to be reproduced alongside the following assessment data figures.

The following summaries of the data indicate some interesting trends that can be explored further, despite the small sample size. I have presented the checklist data in each section and will then discuss my findings before presenting the next section.
Assessment checklist data analysis

**Life Skills**

In Table 6.3, key life skills of the students, as identified by their parents are summarised. Assessment occurred at four months into the project for Community A and ten months into the project at Community B and Community C.

**Table 6.3  Life Skills Assessment Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXHIBITING THIS BEHAVIOUR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COMMUNITY A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can use the toilet properly</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can clean their teeth properly</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can wash themselves in the shower</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can feed themselves</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can ask for food if they’re hungry</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dresses and undresses self or uses fingers with food</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = can’t do it;  S = learning to do it;  A = can do it); * = no response given for this question, still counted in total.)
Figure 6.3  Life Skills data totalled across three sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses toilet properly</th>
<th>Can clean teeth</th>
<th>Can bath themselves</th>
<th>Can feed themselves</th>
<th>Can ask for food</th>
<th>Dresses and undresses self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N - can't do it</td>
<td>S - learning to do it</td>
<td>A - can do it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is the same information presented in a different way and looking only at totals. Clearly in Figure 6.3 it can be seen that most children are very competent with food – they can ask for food and feed themselves. However, a number of children are only developing basic hygiene skills of cleaning their teeth and using the toilet.

This is clearly linked with general health issues – as discussed in Chapter 2, there is a strong link between education and health and this is a real, fundamental opportunity. If families of small children are having difficulty establishing hygiene routines with children, for whatever reason, then a before school program such as researched here presents an ideal opportunity for discussing and supporting this development in the children.

Many of the mothers, in response to the question about whether the child could clean their teeth or not, hesitated. Not because they didn’t know if their child could do it or not, but because in most households there were no toothbrushes. At Community B, when the dentist came to visit, we made a book about going for a check-up. We also
decided to make a book about how to clean your teeth – in fact, the dentist asked us for a copy. However, acquiring toothbrushes was a difficult exercise – while there was some limited access through the public dental system, they were reluctant to give them to us because they knew that they were disposable items and would not last very long at all. This access to resources and the fact that there is nowhere to keep them is a very real issue that we came up against again and again and has a real impact on the lives and the learning of the children.

**Reading Skills**

Table 6.4 provides a snapshot of the reading related skills of the children, as identified by the parents and myself ten months into the project at Community A and four months into the project at Community B and Community C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXHIBITING THIS BEHAVIOUR</th>
<th>COMMUNITY A</th>
<th>COMMUNITY B</th>
<th>COMMUNITY C</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS GIRLS TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS GIRLS TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS GIRLS TOTAL</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Picks up books to have a look</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N 0 0 0</td>
<td>S 1 1 2</td>
<td>A 2 1 3</td>
<td>N 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knows which is the right way up</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N 2 0 2</td>
<td>S 0 0 0</td>
<td>A 1 1 2</td>
<td>N 2 0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Turns the pages from left to right</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N 2 0 2</td>
<td>S 0 0 0</td>
<td>A 1 1 2</td>
<td>N 2 0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Looks after books</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N 3 0 3</td>
<td>S 0 1 1</td>
<td>A 0 0 0</td>
<td>N 2 0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tells stories about pictures in books</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N 2 1 3</td>
<td>S 0 0 0</td>
<td>A 1 0 1</td>
<td>N 2 1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knows that books have both print and pictures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N 3 0 3</td>
<td>S 0 1 1</td>
<td>A 0 0 0</td>
<td>N 2 0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXHIBITING THIS BEHAVIOUR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COMMUNITY A</td>
<td>COMMUNITY B</td>
<td>COMMUNITY C</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks about books</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a favourite book that they ask you to read with them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read some labels on things eg coke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can read some of the signs around the community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands that names and other words can be written down and read back</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognises own name when written</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = can’t do it;  S = learning to do it;  A = can do it); * = no response given for this question, still counted in total.)
Figure 6.4  

**Reading Skills totalled across the three sites**

![Reading Skills Chart]

Figure 6.4 gives a very clear picture of the under-development of book knowledge in these three sites. From the outset, nearly all children would *look* at books and so were aware of them in their surroundings, but did not interact with them very much at all. However, over half of the children could read some labels on things – Dunn’s assessment tool did then provide some useful information. This finding fits well with that about life skills – most of the children were able to look after themselves, find food, and clean themselves. They found it harder when they needed equipment, such as a toothbrush, or using the toilet. Here, reading is happening with the labels on food, which are in the immediate life sphere of the children. Books, however, are not readily available; neither are magazines and newspapers.

**Writing skills**

At the same time that the previous two checklists were administered, the one on writing skills, as summarised in Table 6.5, was also administered. When the children first began the project, they had not been exposed to any writing equipment and so practised none of these behaviours.
Table 6.5  Writing Skills Assessment Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXHIBITING THIS BEHAVIOUR</th>
<th>COMMUNITY A</th>
<th>COMMUNITY B</th>
<th>COMMUNITY C</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puts the crayons in their mouths or crinkles paper</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bangs crayons on paper</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scribbles randomly</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scribbles up and down or side to side</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scribbles in lines</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>Scribbles in circles</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>COMMUNITY B</td>
<td>COMMUNITY C</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draws with lots of different things - pencils, textas, brushes, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>Holds crayons etc in a fist grip</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holds crayons etc in a writing grip</td>
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<tr>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does their own drawings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copies someone else’s drawings or scribble or writing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can do paintings - one brush one colour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Skills

**NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXHIBITING THIS BEHAVIOUR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>COMMUNITY A</th>
<th>COMMUNITY B</th>
<th>COMMUNITY C</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puts crayons in mouth</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangs crayons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random scribbling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scribbles up &amp; down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Scribbles in circles</td>
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<td>Scribbles in lines</td>
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<td>Scribbles in circles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scribbles in circles</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of different media</td>
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<td>Copies</td>
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<td>Paints</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tells the story of painting</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = can’t do it;  S = learning to do it;  A = can do it); * = no response given for this question, still counted in total.

**Figure 6.5  Writing Skills data totalled across three sites**

![Figure 6.5 Writing Skills data totalled across three sites](image_url)
Given the spread of ages of the children, we are seeing here a spread of development of writing skills acquired in the first four to ten months of the project. I have surmised that these skills are developing with the support of two factors. One, they can correlate with the development of hand skills which the children are competent with. This can be seen in the following section. Secondly, they do not rely on working directly with the unknown language, English, and so can develop in a more familiar way. There is the possibility here that the children are developing the mechanics of writing without developing literacy skills. This is supported by the item: telling the story of their painting. The development of this skill is coming much later than I would have predicted. All the children loved to paint but were reluctant to talk about their painting – either to me, through their caregivers, or to their caregivers without me around. It seemed to me that unless children were asked to paint something specific and it resembled that thing in some ‘acceptable’ way, then no painting was assigned a story. This could be a normal pattern of literacy development for children in Central Australia but is another point for educators to consider. The mechanics seemed to be coming before the spoken language.

**Hand skills**

Again, this checklist was administered within four to ten months of the project. Unlike for the previous two checklists, many of the skills identified here were able to be developed by the children prior to the project, for example, *picks up small objects* and *hand preference* are childhood developmental markers rather than acquired literacy skills.

### Table 6.6 Hands Skills Assessment Data

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>COMMUNITY A</th>
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<th></th>
<th>COMMUNITY C</th>
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<th>TOTAL</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grips strongly with fingers and firm</td>
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<td>Skills</td>
<td>COMMUNITY A</td>
<td>COMMUNITY B</td>
<td>COMMUNITY C</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>up and replaces small objects</td>
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<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Shows which hand he/she likes to use for tasks</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolls, twists, kneads clay, dough etc</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does jigsaw puzzles</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threads objects</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses tools properly - digging sticks, scissors etc</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = can’t do it; S = learning to do it; A = can do it); * = no response given for this question, still counted in total.
Out of all the sections, this one was the one where parents responded with the most confidence. All the children were developing these hand skills with confidence and ease. When considering their responses to whether the children were using tools properly, the consideration was to do with using sharp knives rather than basic cutlery.

With two of these items we needed to supply the materials and equipment for the children to then be able to develop these skills. The first, jigsaws, we approached by buying lots of jigsaw puzzles for both parents and children to do together. As was expected, the youngest children could not do them and by the fourth month of the project when the assessment was made, the older ones were learning and the oldest children were able to do them on their own. With the threading question we did not supply the materials and the mothers all identified this skill as something that the children were not familiar with. Almost all the children had velcro shoes and so there were no laces to do up. Without the materials then this particular developmental marker was not met. This was not to do with the competence of the children though but rather with the identifier itself and is another indication of how an assessment tool may not cater to the children it seeks to assess.
**School skills**

School skills data collected at the same time as the other checklist assessment data is correlated in Table 6.7

Table 6.7  **School Skills Assessment Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>COMMUNITY A</th>
<th>COMMUNITY B</th>
<th>COMMUNITY C</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>BOYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can say hello to whitefellas</td>
<td>N 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>S 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks whitefellas in the eye when talking to them</td>
<td>N 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>S 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>A 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will sit still and listen for a while</td>
<td>N 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>S 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A 0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can pack up when work’s finished</td>
<td>N 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>S 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 6.7 School skills totalled across three sites](image)
Given the spread of ages, as presented in Figure 6.2 and duplicated here, I would argue that, at the time of assessment, the children were developing these ‘school culture’ skills fairly well. Given that the children had at least one semester of the project before being assessed, and that at the start of the project none of the children were exhibiting these behaviours, it is clear that the children have developed these skills during the time of the project.

If this is the case, then why the lack of development of reading and writing skills? There are two possible answers to this question. One is that the program was not designed well enough and failed due to a lack of expertise. The other is that the cross-cultural school skills are relatively easier for the children to develop than literacy type skills which are completely new and more cognitively demanding. This could be because relationships and interacting with other people form the foundation of life and culture for Aboriginal children and so communication, even cross-cultural communication moves quickly from a cognitive to an associative task once the relevant situational language is learned in context. However, literacy itself is a new form of communication and there is no bridge to their home culture which is a non-literate one. This would mean that literacy learning remains a cognitively demanding task and thus takes more time and more effort.

This is supported by Cummins work in this area. Cummins (2003) reaffirms his earlier work from 1979 where he first posed the distinction between ‘basic interpersonal communicative skill’ and ‘cognitive academic language proficiency’. He also maintains that within the range of language tasks there are a range of cognitive demands placed on the learner and that it is the context which will influence the level of cognitive engagement as well as the language requirements. Activities then can be context-embedded/context-reduced and/or cognitively undemanding/cognitively demanding. The language and literacy learning situation here for these children then is clearly a cognitively demanding task as they do not have proficiency in this second language and reading itself is a cognitive task. However, the children do have communicative skill in their first language and so can rely on secondary cues such as facial gestures to support communication, thus making this interaction a cognitively undemanding task despite the fact that it may occur in a context-reduced situation.
**Language skills**

**Table 6.8 Language skills indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What languages are they learning to speak?</th>
<th>These indicators are included to show that the data collection included this information for each child. The issue of languages used and learnt has been discussed earlier.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What languages do they hear at home?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What words are they using at the moment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The language skills of the children has been analysed in detail in Chapter 5.

**Summary of assessment findings**

I have summarised the general trends in the data as follows:

- The children are developing many skills at home that translate well into the more formalised learning situation and can be used to build on. For example, the dexterity and visual discrimination skills shown by the children enabled them to ‘conquer the art’ of jigsaw puzzles with relative ease.
- Where a particular literacy or school-type skill relies on the provision of equipment then it can not be assumed that the children will develop these skills without that opportunity being presented. For example, with no threading materials, this was not a skill that the children were generally developing.
- With very little or no reading and writing materials at home the children were not developing these skills to the level that would be expected of them when entering school.
- Schools may have to develop specific and targeted programs for the development of toilet skills in conjunction with parents and local Health Workers.
- A lot of the children do not have toothbrushes at home.

**FOSTERING COMMUNITY CAPITAL**

In looking at the ‘what happened’? it is possible to expand the definition of effectiveness to include sustainability and community capital. Community – or social – capital can be defined as *tangible benefit* to the community that enhances the general well-being and strength of the community. (ECCD Group 1998). The training of a worker for a specific job will contribute to the community through the
increase in knowledge and capability in the community. The running of a playgroup may contribute to the community capital by strengthening and enhancing the parenting of the children.

In order to contribute to the community through this program we endeavoured to involve the wider community and organisations and create a bigger literacy focus in the community rather than just during playgroup time. In this way we hoped to create a flow-on literacy and education effect by fostering positive experiences and opportunities.

Thus, in determining effectiveness at a program level it was necessary to look further than the number of children participating, the number of contacts, the literacy and school behaviours exhibited by the children. It was also necessary to look at the training that the workers and parents themselves received, the involvement of the community and its organisations. The ECDC Group research, reports and discussion papers previously discussed in the literature review, serve to show that an increase in community capital increases economic development, educational achievement, health and life expectancies (EDDC Group 1998). And so, in analysing the ‘what happened’ I looked further than the defined parameters of the project itself.

Unfortunately, we did not gather health data on the children and so I have no information that would help to determine effectiveness through the increase in health benefits on an individual basis. Given the importance of the health/education interface this is a gap in the research. However, one aspect of the programs that is clear and measurable is that of coordination with the Health Centre and so I have taken this as being of benefit to the health of the children.

In looking back over the project, I can find the following elements in the actual organisation and running of the playgroups. Not all the sites had all of these elements.

- A local Aboriginal worker was running the program
- The local worker was paid for their work
- The local worker received training
- Advisory support and help was available
- Resources and funding were accessible
There was strong community support
There was strong school support
The program consisted of home visits
The program was centralised
The program was coordinated with the Health Centre
The support officer had Early Childhood training
A Parent Education Program ran in conjunction with program.
The program had its own place.

I have summarised data from each of the sites in table 6.9 indicating the absence or presence of these factors.

**Table 6.9 Elements of the three programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Community A</th>
<th>Community B</th>
<th>Community C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal worker running the program</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local worker paid to run program</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for local worker</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory support and help</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources brought in</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own local resources</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong community support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong school support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home visits</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central program</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination with Health Centre</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood trained support worker</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Education Program</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own place</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who ran the program
Community B had a local Aboriginal worker to run its program. This was attempted at Community C but didn’t work. At Community B, that worker was trained and working within a team. At Community B the worker had strong support and guidance from the principal. At Community C, the worker was isolated and the only support came from me visiting.
At Community A, there was no local worker.

Working Together
Working with Parents
While discussions were held with participating parents, these were all targeted to the early literacy needs of the participating children and their education in general as per the project outlines. Adult education or job-skills and training only occurred in one of the programs to a very limited extent - the training of the Assistant Teachers at Community B to run the playgroups. The groups did go further than the PAT or HIPPY programs, in that a targeted Early Childhood service was provided directly for the benefit on the children, rather than simply working with the parents, however, do not fit the definition of two-generation programs.

This ‘missing’ element of parent education deserves some further discussion. As a non-local non-indigenous woman, I myself felt that my role with the project was very clear and it was not my role to go any further than this. As my relationships with the families and women developed, I was able to initiate discussions about the children’s education needs and we often talked about other things going on in each other’s lives but there was no targeted, programmed, detailed parent education program. What we did have was an informal process of talking about the children and what they were learning, what school would be like for them, what the families could do at home to help the children learn, what education the women had had and what their aspirations might be.

Strategies
I will present here some of the successful strategies that I used with parents even though I had no formalised program.
Talk with families
Talk openly with people about their schooling experiences. One dad at Community A talked about how important playgroup is for his little children because when he started school he never had anything like that and he felt a bit lost when he started school.

Another woman at Community B talked about her school experience and cried because it had been so negative for her.

Write things down
Make lists with the women - what do we want our children to learn before they go to school? Put this list up at the women’s centre and give a copy to the school. This will also model writing for the little ones.

Sharing and talking about the little children
Give the women a place where they can discuss what their children are doing and where this discussion is valued. By putting questions on the enrolment form like 'does your child tell you when they need to go the toilet’ will help spark discussion about toilet training etc.

Growin' up with culture strong video
This Batchelor Institute resource is all about the different ways of having playgroups, childcare centres in your community and the type of activities that you can run and the options for funding. The women loved this video and watched it all the way through and then discussed it.

Teach the women to plan for playgroup
We used the following questions to make a plan for playgroups. We didn’t always follow it but it was a good beginning to teaching the women how to run their own playgroups.

• What will we do?
• What will we need?
• Why will we do it?
• How did it go?

Evaluate the program
I gave the women a big chart with questions on it and we used that as a way to talk about the program and begin to develop our evaluative skills. I presented the questions at the beginning of playgroup so that everyone had time to think about the answers.

- Why do we have playgroup?
- What’s been good?
- What do we need to do next?

**Working with the council**

The role of the different community councils was not very clearly defined in relationship to our project.

With Community A I would sign in for each visit and talk with the non-indigenous council clerk’s secretary. I had permission from the council to conduct the project which was done with letters and when Brenda’s dad became council chairperson it made it easy to talk with him but to my knowledge the project was never discussed at council level.

With Community B I signed in once at the beginning of the project but always managed to arrive during the time the office was shut and so had very little to do with the local council. The council chairperson had given his approval for the project to run within the community in response to a written request but I never spent time talking with him or reporting formally to council.

With Community C I never had any contact with anyone in their role of council.

All three community councils were sent copies of the final report. They were not consulted on the findings nor were the findings presented to them.

This is a gap in the research in that could have improved the project. However, it seemed to me that at the time of the project, none of the councils considered it their role to be interested in or oversee the project and ownership belonged to the schools. This was of course because I was working for the education department and based at the schools. Perhaps if I had been a health department employee then this would have shifted to the health centre.
As the discussion of community control shows, this is shifting ground in the Northern Territory and a community controlled program built on a needs basis may lead to increased outcomes.

**Working with the school**

I always kept in touch with what the school was doing. When the school at Community A was sending home writing bags one of the students’ stories was about her mother using the name flashcards with her little sister. Because I spent time working with the teacher at Community A undertaking professional development with him I knew exactly what the school program was.

This connection between home and school cannot be underemphasised. I was a communication bridge for Brenda’s family and facilitated not only her starting school but her return to school after some absence. This was possible because I had a defined relationship with the family – my role was to be interested in the education of the children and help the families with education. As an education department employee and experienced teacher I had a relationship with the schools – that of adviser. One thing I would think about was whether the fact that I was an outsider was impacting too much on these relationships. I came to the conclusion that it was my status as an ‘official expert’ that gave more freedom to the role I was playing rather than being perhaps constricted by obligation as a family member might. Many larger schools do in fact have Home Liaison Officers who are local indigenous people working in this very role. The reality is that it is not economically viable for each of the smaller communities to be resourced with such an officer and so it would usually be a visiting adviser creating the role within the community. However, because the role can become a defined one then any officer can then take over and be the facilitator providing they take the time at the beginning to create the relationship. The implication of all this is that the role of an ‘early childhood adviser’ would need to be very clearly negotiated between the agency/s and the community.

**Working with the Health Centre**

It is an historical fact in the Northern Territory that the health centres and the schools have developed separately. It is an acknowledged reality that the two organisations within a community either do not or cannot work together for reasons of overworked,
understaffed centres or the fact that the two managers – sister and principal – clash personally.

At Community B there was one occasion when the Health Centre utilised the play group for visiting health professionals to access the women to discuss some health issues around kidney disease in little children. The Health Sister and Health Workers reported that this was a very successful session and that this kind of working together was a great idea. This aspect of parent education then is something that can be considered as a possible extension and enrichment of the program. The reality of this session was that it changed the focus of the playgroup somewhat in that more non-indigenous, non-local people were present and taking the attention of the women away from the children.

An interagency approach then needs more work than just a memorandum of understanding or an ‘edict from the bureaucracy’. To be of real benefit to the community a before school program that was both health and education focused would either have to be independent of both but working with both using their facilities and resources, both people and physical or it would have to be staffed so that it did not drain extra resources from the school or the health centre.

**Working with the store**

The research done in conjunction with the local store at Community B highlights the need for programs to coordinate with the local store. In many remote communities there is just the one store and most people rely on it for all of their purchases. By working together it is possible to ensure that there are literacy materials available in the community.

**SUSTAINABILITY**

The definition of sustainability is obvious – can the program continue?

For almost two years at Community A and for almost eighteen months at Community B and Community C, 23 children aged four and under accessed some form of before school program that would not have been on offer without this program running.

But were these programs sustainable – would they survive the end of the project?
Community A

Was the work done at Community A by the families and myself successful? Did this community pass the acid test proposed by NTDE management?

Yes - according to official reporting and evaluating systems. ‘The project through the development of successful early literacy programs has addressed many of the issues of early literacy currently being debated nationally...’ (Laurie, in Bat 1999)

What really happened here though? A non-indigenous worker was nominated to work with the community, without consultation and arrived with considerable enthusiasm and energy. Initial interest was high and many play groups and home visits were conducted.

Within around eight months, participation was limited to two families. During the second year of the project, only one family was participating.

The one project participant who started school during the life of the project made a very successful start to school and when her attendance began to falter, the project worker was able to discuss this issue with her family and get her back to school.

The second child of this family, brother to Brenda, started school in 2000 and has had the same easy and successful start to school that Brenda had.

However, the school reports that Brenda’s attendance over the past three years has not been satisfactory. Her family tell me that she is now living with family at another community and going to school out there. They said that they sent her out there to get away from the grog in their family.

Many families in this community did not participate and no long term program developed as a result. One participant commented when asked what didn’t happen that she thought might have, ‘A childcare centre.’

What I see that happened is that there is a need for families to have contact and support from someone who can talk with them about their children, provide the link
into the school and provide the resources for the little ones at home to have playgroup. When this is happening, the energy and excitement is high and the focus is there for the children and their learning. When this support and this link to the school are gone, it is harder for the families to maintain this focus and other family needs take over.

In terms of sustainability, this program was a failure.

**Community B**

When it was running, this program was seen as being very successful - there were around twelve children attending each session, with around four to five adult women. Sessions were held weekly for the first few months, then fortnightly, then every day when the program moved to the school. Although initially run by me, this program very quickly became owned by the community and run by the women themselves, with my help. This program had very strong support from the principal of the school.

When the program moved into the school it changed and became more structured and formal, with Kaylene wanting to write a ‘proper program’ and call it preschool. Mothers and the really little children stopped coming. However, the three and four year olds were coming and were now part of the whole school culture.

The Health Centre coordinated with the playgroup to access the women when Health Prevention program officers were in the community - eg for Iron Deficiency. The Health Centre sister also set up a little library in the clinic where we put the books that we made.

At the end of the project, I would have stated that the program at Community B was the most successful and sustainable.

However, after the project was over and there was a change in principal the new principal took over the teaching of this program, formalised it and moved it into a little classroom and turned it into an official preschool program. Ownership changed. Mothers stopped coming at all and the worker left the school. The program did not survive the change in principal.
Community C
Playgroup ran at Community C, a small Homelands, only when I visited and brought the equipment. All the children who were there at the time would participate, bringing their mothers with them. At Community C we had clear evidence of little ones beginning to read and draw and write at playgroup time. When we tried to set up playgroup in the Homelands by buying the resources, the woman who was the most likely to run it, said that it would be too hard to do it by herself and she did not want responsibility for the equipment. Again, without support, she did not feel that she could run the playgroup.

When the project finished, so too did playgroup at Community C. Also, because their school had been closed, some families chose to move to Community B in order for their children to go to school.

In terms of sustainability, the program at Community C was a failure.

Which of these programs was the most successful and why?
Clearly, Community B has the most elements that I considered a factor in the success of the program followed by Community C with Community A not having many at all. In the final analysis there were, I propose, three major factors that impacted on the success or failure of these programs – community choice, paid workers and support from the principal.

The first is whether or not the communities chose to have the program. The inclusion of Community A in the project was a direction from senior management. The community, then, had not asked for the project, but rather agreed to an outside agency establishing the project and inviting their participation. At Community B and Community C, the communities decided that they wanted the project and then competed with other schools for it. However, I must acknowledge that the school principal of Community B and Community C was the driving force behind these two communities being included. What made the program at Community B different was the fact that the workers were paid employees who had control over the program;
their own space and some funding and resources. This program had very strong support from the school principal.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter I have detailed many of my findings from my research and searched for common threads among them. Firstly I detailed my running of a playgroup such as this – how to establish it, how to maintain its focus and how to sustain the program through the myriad of possible challenges. I then moved to the children themselves and their learning, generally and specifically via a case study. Following this I presented my findings on how to determine the effectiveness of such programs. Finally I presented my analysis and considerations of the apparent success or failure of each of the programs.

Throughout this chapter I have highlighted that a teaching/learning situation such as this is a complex interaction of cultures, languages, learning styles and bureaucracies. I have found that there are in fact common threads that can provide valuable information at both system and teaching levels.

In the following chapter I will summarise the thesis, come to conclusions about this research and make some recommendations for consideration.
CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS
RECOMMENDATIONS
CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION
In this chapter I will firstly give a brief overview of the thesis itself before recapping on the research context, the project itself and the findings. I will then present and discuss some of the limitations of this research before I present my conclusions relating to literacy, assessment and transition to school. I will then make some recommendations at a system level that relate to overall program funding and implementation. Whether or not this research is applicable in other contexts will be explored as too will be the needs for further research. Before I present my final conclusion I will present a postscript on the three sites and the ‘before school’ education in those communities.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS
This thesis has been presented in seven chapters, beginning with an overview of the problem being researched. This chapter presented the very depressing situation of the low literacy levels amongst indigenous students in Australia and particularly in remote Northern Territory. The various policies and programs aimed at addressing this situation were presented. Having then established the need for the research, the outline of the research process was presented. In this section I defined the scope and limitations of the study thus giving the research the framework in which it was conducted.

In Chapter 2, I moved on to discuss the articles, research and discussion papers that inform this work. Firstly, I explored the concept of early literacy in both the general sense and in this particular context. I then moved to look more at life and learning in general for the participant children and how they are raised. After discussing the interconnectedness of health and education and the importance and benefit of early intervention including parent education programs, I moved on to explore the current understandings on the disconnections between home and school and the impact of this on the children. This chapter was about presenting the current thinking on the underlying theories and understandings used in this thesis.

Chapter 3 was all about the actual design of the research, the methods and the instruments used and the limitations of the study.
In Chapter 4, I presented the assessment instrument that I developed for use in the project. I presented the considerations of content, format and implementation relating to the instrument and discussed its usefulness.

In Chapter 5, I presented what we actually did during the project, giving the geographical, social and literacy contexts of the three sites as well as the implementation of the project and the literacy program. This chapter presented the more human face of our work. In this chapter I also presented a model for literacy learning that showed the possibility that a child could develop emergent literacy behaviours in their own language when the literacy materials provided were in another language.

Chapter 6 was all about the findings of the project. I explored the effectiveness and sustainability of a program generally as well as looking at the kind of activities and strategies that worked, always considering the reasons for success and/or failure. I then presented some of the evidence of the learning of the children followed by a more detailed case study of one of the participant children and her family. Finally, I analysed and compared the three different programs, looking for common elements and essential elements of success.

Finally, this chapter summarises the research and its findings and allows me to propose some recommendations for consideration in both the policy and the teaching/learning spheres.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEXT OF THIS RESEARCH
Over a period of two years, at three different sites, Early Childhood Care and Education programs were run by the Northern Territory Department of Education. These programs were run with the intention of exposing the young children to early literacy experiences and to enhance their start to school. This project was considered to have been successful. Over those two years, data was collected about how the programs were running and about how the children were learning. Other programs are running in the Northern Territory – these are either in the Top End or in very large communities. This project and research was conducted in smaller communities in Central Australia. These communities have their own
challenges – of distance from centralised support organisations, lack of funding, lack of resources, and disempowerment through social, economic and health issues. While there is still very little research on any kind of ECCE program in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, there is virtually nothing written about how to provide service to the needs of the little communities in the Centre.

There is currently a world-wide trend to develop more needs based models of delivery. This research then provides some possibilities for models of delivery to these smaller communities in Central Australia. It may be that these findings can be generalised to other areas and larger communities.

This research also looked to the ways that the children preferred to learn when early literacy activities were conducted. It explored the development of emergent literacy behaviours in young indigenous children in Central Australia and identified some common learning strategies. Again, some of this may be generalisable to other situations.

**BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT AND THE RESEARCH**

This research was conducted over a period of two years during the course of a project funded and implemented by the Northern Territory Department of Education. The broader project worked with both schools and families around the development, measurement and fostering of early literacy behaviours in indigenous before-school-age children in three targeted remote Central Australian communities. This research focused on the families and the children and their literacy knowledge, experiences and skills as well as more general ‘school readiness’. Data was collected in various ways including visual records, interviews, diary notes, official planning and reporting mechanisms and through a specifically developed checklist. The researcher, myself, formed part of the research as a participant observer whose very presence, culture and ethnicity impacted on and formed part of the research.

This was not straight forward, statistically driven research but a more complex sequence of observation, discussion, negotiation and interaction of cultures, languages and knowledge. In this research, I was not only the researcher gathering information but the project officer whose very job it was to effect change. The results
then are not strong statements of knowledge that can be immediately generalised but rather a collection of ideas and propositions that can be considered.

**LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

**Size**
This was a small study with a limited number of participants across only three communities. The sample sizes were very small and it is difficult then to extrapolate the data into any generalisable statements that can be verified statistically. The project also only ran for a total of two years which included the establishment and reporting phases. More time would have given more data.

**The researcher**
This study must be at least affected, if not limited, by me being a non-indigenous non-local educator who was not living on any of the communities. However, given that it is a reality in Central Australia that small communities are still having to source expertise from outside their communities then this research will provide valuable information for such workers.

Another limitation must surely be my lack of qualifications in the field of early childhood education. Again, this is the reality of education in Central Australia where there are only a handful of properly trained educators working with the younger children. However, this lack of training will no doubt give this work some lack of depth that may have been present with the necessary undergraduate study.

**Resourcing**
This project was also constrained by lack of funding of resources. It may be that more detailed research can occur as programs are funded and resourced and begin to evolve with continuity.

**Logistics**
I have to acknowledge that the remoteness of two of the communities and the effort involved in organising and travelling for playgroups made this exhausting work. This means that my observations may at times have been not as acute as they could
have been. It also means that more visits would have occurred more often and more regularly with easier access.

**CONCLUSIONS REACHED**

**The type of program**

All three models of Early Childhood Care and Education programs presented here resulted in an increase in literacy and school type behaviours of the children participating. This has an impact on planning of education organisations in Central Australia. If this is the sole aim of the program then any of these models will work to achieve increased entry literacy levels. If, however, the goal is to do more than just that then it is the model of Community B that needs to be considered – where local workers are trained and paid to deliver programs. In all three models, it was essential to have a visiting adviser to keep up the momentum of the programs.

**The implications for establishment of programs**

Any of these three models will work to help get children ‘ready for school’ and thus support the development of early literacy. But if the goal of the community / government / society is to increase community capital then really only a version of the program implemented at Community B will work.

**Literacy**

There are some common elements to the way the children were learning. Firstly, they must have role models to copy. It is an essential element of the program that the mothers, fathers, aunties, grandmothers, siblings, the family, are reading and writing. Not just at playgroup but at home. However, in two of the three communities, it was either impossible or very expensive to purchase or access reading and writing equipment except in an official, form-filling role. It is vital then that communities have access to reading and writing materials. In two of the three communities, it was clearly shown that the adults do read newspapers and magazines. The implication for this is that some form of negotiation, coercion or subsidy needs to occur to ensure that people can access reading and writing materials.

Children prefer to read books that are about real people that they know. These books can be written in different English genres such as recount or procedure and children
will still want to read them but the books with photographs were always preferred over others.

There is a definite progressive learning behaviour when the young children are learning something new and that includes a step of having someone else hold their hand and show them. This has implications for inclusion in the classroom teaching practices in Central Australia where Assistant Teachers are often told ‘don’t do it for them, let them do it themselves’.

The implications for supporting literacy development

On a community level
Communities need to ensure that there are books, magazines and newspapers for people to read. This can be through sale at the local shop, through the creation of small libraries at places like the Health Centre, by community use of the school library. It has been clearly established by this project that indigenous adults in Central Australia want to be able to read the newspaper and magazines. Supporting this need will then help to engender a ‘culture of reading’ so that the children have the role modelling so vital to the development of literacy.

On a family level
All the families that participated in this research enjoyed learning about that ‘secret whitefella knowledge’ (Harris 1992) about what the children need to learn before they start school. All the families wanted to have someone that was interested in the education of their children and could provide that link into school.

In this project it was clearly established that families wanted this level of support and assistance. As was obvious from the parent interviews, western education itself does not go back further than two generations.

Another factor that must be noted is the strong desire of the participants to gain knowledge about school and about reading, writing and learning. This desire for knowledge clearly shows that despite the potential for assimilationist consequence, the families want their children to participate fully in education and achieve as highly as possible. It also challenges the ‘values’ notion attached to previous research where researchers such as Dunn have stated that parents need to value literacy –
participants in this research all valued the development of literacy in their children but in most cases had neither the skills nor the knowledge to support this.

On an individual level

For the adults
Each participant in the project expressed the desire for good education for their children. Most of the adults had little or no English literacy competence. Through this project the participating adults were all provided with an opportunity to read and write with purpose and to participate in early literacy learning activities that they themselves may not have experienced. These factors combine to increase the literacy competence of the adults.

At interview, many participants expressed hurt, anger and shame about their own education experiences. Through the provision of a positive education experience with their children, some of this hurt can be healed. A more positive experience will in turn create stronger role modelling for the children.

For the children
The children need role models, people to watch and mimic. These can be parents or siblings.
They also need books. In this research the children preferred books that had photographs of people and places that they knew and preferred stories that had been written about them. No genre or text type was preferred so long as the book was about family. This means that it is not simply a matter of giving the children books but it is a case of making the books and the making of the books, from shared experience through to writing the story to the production of the book becomes a learning and teaching opportunity.

The children are able to develop emergent literacy behaviours despite the books being written in English and English not being their first language/s. Although this might not be the ideal situation it is the reality and this research has shown that it is possible for this to happen. In this research it was the English oracy of the mothers that provided the bridge for the children between me the non-indigenous non-speaker and between the children and the English books. The other bridge was the books
being about real life things that the children could talk about without needing to be able to read word for word.

On a teaching level
The children need to be given opportunities to learn in the ways that they prefer rather than the ways that perhaps a teacher prefers. This research has provided some examples and guidelines that would strengthen the teaching / learning process. The most disparate one is that the children in this study prefer someone to show them by holding their hands and this is a part of the process itself.

Assessment
In attempting to assess the knowledge and skills of the children in this context we found it necessary to develop our own assessment tool. The final design was in checklist format and relied not on the observations of the teacher but rather on the observations of the parent, in discussion with the teacher. This style of assessment was found to be the most appropriate in this cultural and linguistic situation and in fact provided more benefit through the discussions held.

In the assessments conducted there were some factors of design and implementation that need to be considered. There are some skills that the children were developing that did not translate to the checklist because that particular indicator relied on specific equipment which the children were not familiar with. However, this did not mean that the children were not developing this skill. There were also skills that the children excelled in that were not heavily weighted in the tool, thus perhaps under-emphasising the children’s advanced development in this area. One example of this would be hand skills where the children were in fact able to handle very sharp knives as tools and their parents’ judgement of their abilities was on this high level of competence.
It is perhaps unfair to assess children on skills that they cannot develop because of a lack of resources – for example, cleaning their teeth. However, including this information provides invaluable information to the teachers so that the programming of learning can occur.

The implications for assessment
Assessment is a necessary part of the education reality of our times. In a context such as this, the process of the assessment itself is as important as the information gathered. Teachers then should consider the design of their assessment tools to in fact generate this form of discussion with parents.

When considering the kind of information and/or discussion that the assessor is looking for it is important to remember that indigenous children have skills and knowledge in areas that may not be emphasised in a more mainstream assessment tool. By designing the checklist to include the children’s strengths the teacher not only gains invaluable information on which to build a teaching program but gives positive feedback and appreciation of the child’s ability to the parents. This kind of assessment then creates a more positive experience.

To conduct assessment in this way is very time consuming and requires the presence of another person to relieve the teacher of their duties. This means either careful design of the day’s program, getting someone else in to help, or doing assessments with parents outside of the learning context itself.

**Transition to school**

The one child that started school during the project had a smooth transition to school. The teaching staff said that this was because she knew how to use the equipment – pens, scissors, paint etc; she understood about routines like washing hands and sitting still for stories; and there was a constant stream of communication between school, family and project officer. All these elements combined to ensure a great start to school. Unlike all the other students, this child started school role-play writing and with a beginning understanding of phonological awareness in English. When there were problems, the project officer was able to continue the communication with the family to help get her back to school. At Community B when the playgroup moved into the school the children understood some of the ‘school-type’ behaviours expected of them and so continued to come. In both cases it is clear that accessing some form of ECCE program assists the transition to school both through learned behaviours and through the bridge provided by the adviser.

*The implications for transition to school*
Young children need to be able access before school programs in order to make an easy transition to school. By having access to these programs, not only are the children able to make a better start but the teachers themselves are more positive about the child’s achievements. Where this link between the home and school is supported by a specific person, the transition and the continued education dialogue between the family and the school is strengthened.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SYSTEM

In this section I would like to take all of this research, the findings and my considerations and make some statements about steps that could be taken on a system level in order to support the establishment and effectiveness of before school programs in remote Central Australia.

- The Northern Territory government should undertake steps to ensure that all people in the Northern Territory have access to newspapers, magazines and books.
- The NTDE, Territory Health and Family and Children’s Services should work with communities to provide a service for young children and their families that meets their needs.
- These services should include programs to develop early literacy and to learn about school culture and behaviours.

GENERALISABILITY

While this research was conducted in three communities in Central Australia, I would propose that this research and my findings are relevant to most geographically remote indigenous communities in Australia. The reading for this research covered many different indigenous peoples living remotely and I found much that related to the work that we were doing. Although there may be differences in child rearing practices and ways of learning, the linguistic situation of the remote communities gives enough common experience to make this research applicable to many other communities despite their different cultures and languages. All these communities are facing the dilemma of the dominant language of the establishment and the wider community being different from the first languages being learnt by the children. Some communities have reading materials in their own languages; most do not. The lack of reading materials is a common issue in the remote communities in Australia.
The need for the children to have reading and writing role models is a universal element to the successful development of literacy skills.

**FURTHER RESEARCH**

There are a number of different tangents that could be followed from this research that would provide invaluable information to teachers working with small children in Central Australia. There are also other elements of program design and implementation that could be further researched in order to improve access to and success of before school education programs.

**The teaching/learning context**

As a teacher, there were a number of questions that arose for me in the writing of this work that I have discussed with other educators and would like to know the answers to.

**Emergent literacy behaviours**

A more detailed study of these learning behaviours could be conducted where the children are developing these skills in their first language which is not itself a literate language. The progression of these skills to the point where they are applied to the new literate language, English, is a phenomenon worthy of further research. Understanding this juncture of languages and literacies would provide valuable insight and knowledge on the development of literacy generally not just in this learning context.

**Holding on to their hands**

As discussed earlier, most teachers would see this as ‘doing the work for them’ rather than teaching. However, in many circumstances, the children may learn faster if this natural step in their learning process is allowed to occur. The implementation and observation of this technique of teaching/learning would provide valuable information for other teachers.

**Increasing the literacy competency of parents**

It would be valuable research to document the positive effects on the literacy of the participant parents in a program such as this. This in turn would provide further evidence of the efficacy of such programs.
Assessment
I would encourage all educators who are working with young indigenous children to consider the assessment tools that they are using and consider their purpose and effectiveness both for the children and their families as well as the system. This is the kind of research that educators are constantly doing to improve their teaching. It is my suggestion that more remote teachers could be encouraged to expand this pedagogical reflection to become shared findings through journal articles or more formal research, thus contributing to the current discussions.

Program implementation
On a larger scale, there are questions about program design and effectiveness that would benefit from further investigation.

Inter-agency cooperation
Case studies of places where this is already occurring would be valuable for other communities wishing to implement programs. Further, the development of tools/resources that communities could use to clarify this process and funding arrangements would be invaluable.

Reading materials in communities
Unfortunately, more formalised research of the amount of reading done by adults in remote communities would perhaps be required in order to establish the need for the provision of reading materials such as newspapers and magazines either free or for sale.

POSTSCRIPT
While the following section may be depressing, I have included it as a reminder of the vulnerability of communities as they undertake the process of building capacity.

Community A
As of January 2001, Community A still does not have a childcare program running. However, the school is in the process of developing its own IESIP-funded before-school program that will be supported by the community with a CDEP worker. All
children between the ages of birth and five years will be able to participate. Any children aged under four will be required to bring their mother or a carer with them. While there is enthusiasm from the school there is very little commitment from the community and the program is not expected to succeed. There are five local indigenous women in Community A with either completed or current study in Early Childhood education.

**Community B**
In mid-2000, the new principal at Community B decided to teach the preschool program himself and has taken over the class. Kaylene has elected to work as Assistant Teacher in another class rather than continue in the preschool that she started. There is now an expectation in Community B that children will attend preschool. Now that it is an official program, the age limits are applied - so that only three and four-year-olds can attend. Mothers no longer participate in the program.

**Community C**
Community C still has nothing.

**FINAL CONCLUSION**
It has been a privilege to work with the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia and I acknowledge the amount of their time, effort, knowledge and understanding that has informed this work. As a teacher and educator I have sought to work with the best of my knowledge and experience in order to provide a good teaching/learning environment. As a researcher I have sought to collect true and real data that can give insight and understandings in order to improve the teaching and learning of the young children in Central Australia.

It is my hope that this work may inspire and inform some discussion, debate and action in order to better meet the needs of these children and their families. There is still much to learn and much, much more to do.

All this work requires funding and commitment by the communities themselves and by our governments and their agencies. These young children deserve the best education possible. There are some ways that this can be improved. This work has
explored some of those ways and made some proposals to help improve their opportunities.

Let’s do it then, hey!
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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX I**

**Approaches to literacy teaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Theoretical base/origins</th>
<th>Key ideas</th>
<th>Research base</th>
<th>Prominence</th>
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| Maturational readiness     | Gesell and Froebel Children need time to mature and develop holistically before formal teaching of reading. | • Children cannot learn to read until they are ‘ready’  
  • Readiness cannot be hurried as it results from the child having reached a particular stage in their biological maturation  
  • Staff can best assess children’s readiness through observation and child study  | Gesell (1925) | 1940s–1960s         |
| Reading readiness (developmental readiness) | Behaviourism Thorndike and DISTAR (Direct Instruction Model)  
Reading is a special and separate skill that is best learnt through direct instruction based on behaviourist ideas of sequencing learning. Reading is an objective, value-free skill to be acquired. | • Children’s readiness to read can be hastened by appropriate experiences and retarded by inappropriate ones  
  • Children need to be prepared for formal reading instruction.  
  • Children are best prepared (made ready) via structured, sequential, skills-based programs  
  • Skills include visual discrimination, identification of colours, shapes, numbers and letters, left to right progression, sound-letter correspondence  
  • Direct teacher instruction is needed to help children practise these skills  
  • Basal readiness materials help build reading skills.  
  • Children’s readiness is best assessed via standardised tests | Durkin (1966); Chall (1967) | 1960s–1980s Part of USA Head Start initiatives |
| Emergent literacy and Whole language | American psycholinguistics – Goodman key theorist. Dewey and progressive pedagogy. Language is best learnt whole and through everyday texts as | • Literacy emerges early in life  
  • Language is taught whole, through real-world texts,  
  • Teaching is meaning-centred and child-centred and focuses on learning linguistic cues through everyday texts  
  • The teacher’s roles include information giver, | Clay (1966); Teale & Sulzby (1986) | 1980s and early 1990s Strongly endorsed in the NAEYC guidelines on developmentally appropriate practice for young children |
<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emergent literacy and Reading Recovery</strong></td>
<td>New Zealand Marie Clay&lt;br&gt;Targeted at children who fall behind in learning to read after first year of school. NZ research shows 97% of children in the program retain gains.</td>
<td>• importance of diagnosing and preventing literacy problems&lt;br&gt;• set diagnostic tasks to assess readings skills&lt;br&gt;• improvement through targeted and intensive one-to-one instruction&lt;br&gt;• sessions are brisk, with planned variety&lt;br&gt;• exercises and tasks develop sentence structure, grammar and skills for making sense of print&lt;br&gt;• parent involvement is a key component</td>
<td>Clay (1966)</td>
<td>1990s – used in Vic, Qld, NSW, UK and USA Permanently funded in NZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social constructivism</strong></td>
<td>Russian psychologist Vygotsky. Language is a social construction and a social and cultural tool. Language and literacy are culturally specific. Shares several ideas with emergent literacy.</td>
<td>• literacy begins before the formal years of schooling&lt;br&gt;• literacy is encouraged by a print-rich environment&lt;br&gt;• literacy learning occurs through meaningful, authentic language experiences and engaging with real texts&lt;br&gt;• children actively construct their knowledge of literacy; literacy is an ongoing process of meaning making&lt;br&gt;• literacy develops as children try to make sense of social and cultural experiences</td>
<td>Harst, Woodward &amp; Burke (1984)</td>
<td>1990s</td>
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Language is a cognitive construction.
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<th>Key ideas</th>
<th>Research base</th>
<th>Prominence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Critical literacy | Friere Feminist and critical education theorists. Literacy is a catalyst for social action. Shares several ideas with social constructivism. Language is a social construction and a social and cultural tool. Language and literacy are culturally specific. Articulates the political relationships embedded in literacy and language. | • children’s literacy processes are similar to those of older children and adults  
• children from diverse backgrounds bring diverse experiences of literacy with them to the classroom  
• children’s culture, social class, gender and relationships with others fundamentally impact on children’s literacy development  
• mismatches between a child’s culture, social class and gender and the school literacy culture create difficulties for children’s literacy  
• literacy is a powerful force in young children’s identity formation  
• literacy learning is linked with wider networks of power relations in society and children’s literacy learning should enable them to think, read and write critically about these relations and how they touch their lives. | Taylor, 1991; Solsken, 1993; Davies, 1992                                                                                   | 1990s Links strongly with the Anti-Bias Curriculum (Dermon-Sparks, 1989) |

(Tasmanian Office of Education 2003)
### APPENDIX II

**Profile of print literacy awareness and understanding**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WITH ADULT/PEER SUPPORT AND MINIMAL CHILD INPUT (MODELLED)</th>
<th>JOINTLY UNDERTAKEN BY CHILD AND ADULT/PEER (SHARED)</th>
<th>CHILD TAKES LEADERSHIP AND/OR WORKS INDEPENDENTLY (INDEPENDENT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shows awareness of the print literacy they see in their home</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows awareness of the print literacy they see in their community</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows awareness that printed texts vary according to purpose</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows understanding of the link between experience, oral language and written text</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands that texts are ‘read’ from left to right and from top to bottom of the lines</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can recognise own printed English/Skin/nick name</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can ‘write’ some letters of own English/Skin/nick name</td>
<td>In child's first Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX III

Resource review
While doing the research for this project I came across a myriad of resources aimed at helping parents. Below I present a review of those resources in light of their usefulness in the context of remote Aboriginal Australia.

There are many resources available to parents to use with their children before they start school. For example, Dorothy Butler and Marie Clay produced, in 1979, a handbook for parents to use called: *Reading Begins at Home – Preparing children for reading before they go to school*. There was of course, a presumption that parents could read the handbook in order to follow its instructions and guidelines.

There is a large amount of literature that followed on from this handbook. I have selected a range of them.

In 1992 in the US, John Olmsted published *Reading with Young Children - A Parent's Guide*. This was a small booklet aimed at guiding parents on how to read with their children. It was very long and wordy and I would say that anyone who could read and decipher this booklet doesn't need help with reading with their children. It not only makes presumptions about home backgrounds but seems to be involved in social engineering as well. The world is not always the wonderful place that he proposes it to be.

Margery Hornibrook and David McRae published *To be Good at English* in 1994 in Australia. This book is aimed specifically at indigenous parents and aims to help them ‘understand what goes on in the early years of primary school’; and to ‘show how well the children are doing at school and how much many of them enjoy it’. This publication moved away from wordy and complex instructions and used photographs to support the text. This book, however, still starts at school and makes presumptions about parents’ literacy and about there being books in the home. And there is very little Central Australian content, only a bush tucker picture from Watiyawanu.

The 1995 Maningrida publication *Hearing Kids - Reading with Your Child* is a book for parents about speaking and reading with their children who have hearing difficulties. This book is very relevant to Northern Territory parents having been specifically written for them to use as a resource. It is easy for parents to understand and uses drawings of indigenous children to illustrate its guidelines. It is a lovely, colourful, big book with clear wording, using speech bubbles as instructions eg ‘Look at my new book’. However, where is the child's book coming from? School it seems. This reinforces the concept that books come from organisations and are outside the home.

In 1997/1998 it seems that there was an Australia-wide focus by the various education departments and organisations on parents involvement in their children’s learning and in some cases, more specifically, indigenous parents.

From Western Australia in 1997 came the *First Steps* book *Parents as Partners - Helping Your Child's Literacy and Language Development*. Published by EdWA and Alison Dewsbury this is a parent resource book that presents overview of the developmental stages of literacy and gives suggestions to parents for helping their
children. It is very technical in parts and requires a parent to be literate in order to access its content.

Also published in 1997 was the Queensland School Curriculum Council’s *Hand-in-Hand, Parents and children...learning about words and numbers every day*. This is an information package for parents which highlights how everyday family situations can help the development of literacy and numeracy. It includes a video, a series of six topic cards and a handbook. This package used everyday urban life and ‘everyday’ urban people, and is completely inaccessible to anyone not in that circumstance of middle Australia.

More locally, in the Northern Territory, the TopEnd council of ALEA (Australian Literacy Educators Association) published a pamphlet in 1997 titled *Never too young to read*. This pamphlet was aimed at indigenous parents and emphasised the importance of reading to your children from birth. It used drawings of indigenous families as illustrations of simply written points and is a very accessible document. However, again, in a society that doesn't read much, either through choice, lack of resource, or lack of literacy, who will read the pamphlet?

In 1998, the NT ‘Parents as Teachers’ NT published a series of information sheets for Aboriginal parents titled *Play* and *Playing is Learning*. These sheets were developed specifically for Aboriginal parents and are based on the importance of play and the parents’ role in their children’s learning through play. ‘Playing peek-a-boo will encourage your baby to anticipate - an important thinking skill’ is an example from the pamphlet that illustrates the inappropriate examples used. In this publication we see the translation of western child’s play to indigenous learning contexts. A strange combination.

In 1998, ALEA produced pamphlets titled *Literacy and Numeracy - Doing things with your child*. Again, these pamphlets were designed for indigenous parents and contained ideas for encouraging numeracy and literacy activities under the headings - shopping, special days, out & about, at home. These pamphlets were very well-made, with the content more appropriate to the target audience. They do still however make the presumption of there being books, magazines, newspapers etc in the home and available. Also, with one suggestion being ‘Check the prices on products’ – there is the presumption that the store marks the prices on the goods.

Also in 1998, a series of four information and ideas sheets were published by PAT in the Northern Territory. These were written about early literacy and were for parents of babies, toddlers, preschoolers and school-aged children. Although aimed at indigenous parents and using suitable illustrations, and not too wordy for parents who may not be literate in English, the target audience for these pamphlets is not clear and they certainly not all that suitable for indigenous families living in remote Central Australia. The first suggestion for ‘reading with babies’ is to join the local library!

In the ACT in 1998, the Early Childhood Unit of the Department of Education and Community Services published eight pamphlets for parents titled - *Why Sharing Books is Better than Watching TV*. These were designed to increase parents’ knowledge and awareness of beginning literacy practices and the literacy needs of their small children. These pamphlets were written in a language suited to parents, almost a ‘parent meta-language’, rather than simplifying a more technical phrase.
And despite the length of the writing, the deeper content would actually make it beneficial to its projected audience. As for its suitability here, one example stands out – ‘During mealtimes together you can…. choose a menu…….’ This is one example of the differences between the mainstream culture of Australia and that of remote Central Australia.

These written materials were produced specifically target to parents, all in relation to early literacy, some play-focused, some written specifically for indigenous people. Another important source of parent information in our society is the internet.

There are many, many sites devoted to supporting parents and to the networking of parents to share good ideas.

Just three quick examples are:
- www.scholastic.com/smartparenting - this is a commercial site that contains lots of information on child development and needs
- www.parentingresources.ncjrs.org – this site is sponsored by the US government and is part of its juvenile justice program.
- www.mumsweb.com.au is a local Australian site for networking among Australian mothers. This is an interactive, chat-based, commercially sponsored networking site.

All these sites are written for specific target audiences and while the content is as varied as there are types of families, it is the accessibility as well as the content that makes this source of information an entirely untapped resource at the time of writing.

As mentioned earlier, a lot of the resources published to help parents rely on two things. Firstly that the parents are literate and can access the information and secondly that there is reading materials in the home and community. This presumption of a ‘culture of literacy’ is found in almost all materials written, some of them written specifically for a target audience where this is not the case.

As stated within the main body of this thesis, the most appropriate and well-written resources that I have found are those developed by the then Batchelor College, now the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Their Early Childhood Unit within the School of Education attained funding through the Van Leer Foundation for their project ‘Talking Early Childhood’ and developed a series of excellent resources which I will list below. Since this research was done they have also produced some more useful resources. I encourage anyone working in this field to access and use these resources.

- *Talking Early Childhood – A Profile of Services and Programs for Young Aboriginal Children Living in Remote Communities in the Northern Territory*
- *Talking Early Childhood*  (video)
- *Growing Up with Culture Strong*  (video)
- *98/99 Kids’ Stuff Calendar – Looking Through the Windows of Play*
- *Talking Early Childhood – a Resource Book*
**APPENDIX IV**

Plain Language Statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>RESEARCH PROJECT:</strong></th>
<th>Early Literacy Practices in targeted remote Area Aboriginal Communities in Central Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHIEF RESEARCHER:</strong></td>
<td>Melodie Bat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE OF STUDY:</strong></td>
<td>To find out the best ways of teaching young Aboriginal children in Central Australia about reading and writing before they come to school and to share this knowledge with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BENEFITS OF THE STUDY:</strong></td>
<td>This study will help parents understand how they can help their children with learning to read and write. It will also help other schools, playgroups, childcare facilities and education centres such as Batchelor College to make sure that the ways they are teaching the children are the most suitable and effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHAT WOULD BE EXPECTED OF YOU?</strong></td>
<td>If you decide to take part in this research you would take part in the mums’ groups with Melodie and talk with her about how your children learn best. Together you would perhaps make a video or a poster to share your knowledge with other families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONFIDENTIALITY:</strong></td>
<td>No photographs or videos of you will be used without your consent. Also, the final research paper that Melodie will write will not use your names but will use a different name for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YOUR PARTICIPATION:</strong></td>
<td>We would be grateful if you did participate in this work but if you don’t want to it’s okay with us. Even if you do decide to take part and then change your mind, you may leave the research at any time. You will still be able to come to the mums’ groups and your children will be welcomed but no information will be gathered about you or them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESULTS OF THE STUDY</strong></td>
<td>We will be making the video or posters together and you will get copies of that. Melodie will come and talk over her final research paper with you before it is sent to the university. Copies of all student records will be kept by the NTDE and by the school for the teachers to use when they start school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERSONS TO CONTACT</strong></td>
<td>If you have any questions about the project, please contact the researcher, Melodie Bat on ph: 89517536 or talk with her when she comes out to visit. If you have any concerns before commencing, during, or after the completion of the project, you are invited to contact the Executive Officer of the Northern Territory University Human Ethics Committee on 8946 7064. The Executive Officer can pass on any concerns to appropriate officers within the University.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX V

Consent form

I, of

Give my permission to take part in Melodie Bat’s research and I understand that the purpose of the research is to look at the best ways of teaching our young children about reading and writing before they go to school.

I know that

1. My name will not be used in the final research paper.

2. Photographs and videos of myself or my children will not be used unless I give my permission.

3. The results of this work will be used for research purposes and may be reported in education and academic journals.

4. Individual results will be held by the NTDE and the school to be used when my children start school but will not be released to any other person/s unless I ask for this and give my permission.

5. I know that if I do decide to take part and then change my mind, I can leave the research at any time. I know that I will still be able to come to the mums’ groups and my children will be welcomed but no information will be gathered about me or them.

I also give my permission for my children –

to participate in this project.

Signature: Date:

Signature of other parent: Date:
APPENDIX VI

Objectives of the ‘Targeting Early Literacy – Family and School’ project:

1. Improve, by the end of Year 3, the literacy outcomes of participant students and children in targeted Aboriginal communities.
2. Work collaboratively with and support teachers in the implementation of educational best practice in the context of the teaching of early literacy.
3. Assist parents in a range of effective early/emergent literacy activities for their children in the nought to four years range.
4. Work collaboratively with parents fostering understandings of the purpose and advantages of providing early/emergent literacy activities for young children who are below school age and those in the first years of school.
5. Collaboratively develop, implement and evaluate programs which provide professional support both to teachers and parents in the area of early/emergent literacy.
6. Assist the collection of data related to the objectives of the project.
7. Support School Support Services in the team provision of an effective support service to schools, parents and communities.
## APPENDIX VII

Raw scores of enrolment and attendance data of participant children

### Table App.1  Community A - Raw Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Age at June 1998 Yr.mth</th>
<th>Consent given by:</th>
<th>Child Assessed? Number of project contacts: (out of a possible 34)</th>
<th>Languages spoken at home</th>
<th>Parent interview?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Mother &amp; Father</td>
<td>F Yes First Steps DC ESL Profile 15 Western Arrernte Some Pitjantjatjara English</td>
<td>Mother Father Father’s Mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Mother &amp; Father</td>
<td>M Yes Checklist 12 Western Arrernte Some Pitjantjatjara English</td>
<td>Mother Father Father’s Mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>M No 5 Western Arrernte Some Pitjantjatjara English</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>M Yes Checklist 3 Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3? Dob unconfirmed</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>F Yes Checklist 10 Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>F No 10 Eastern Arrernte Central Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>F No 15 Eastern Arrernte Central Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>M Yes Checklist 7 Eastern Arrernte Central Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>F No 8 Eastern Arrernte Central Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>F No 7 Eastern Arrernte Central Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>F No 3 Eastern Arrernte Central Arrernte</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANT CONTACTS: (note that this does not include casual home visits, only planned playgroups and is over a period of 6 terms) 95 Average term contact = 15.83

Note:
Family 1 -  Family 2 -
### Table App.2  Community B - Raw Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Age at June 1998 Yr.mth</th>
<th>Consent given by:</th>
<th>Child Assessed?</th>
<th>Number of project contacts (out of a possible 16)</th>
<th>Languages spoken at home (as identified by parent)</th>
<th>Parent interview?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Anmattyere Some English</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Anmattyere Mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Anmattyere Some Warlpiri</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Mother M</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Anmattyere</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Warlpiri Anmattyere</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Mother M</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Anmattyere Warlpiri</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21†</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anmattyere Some English</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANT CONTACTS:**

(54)

(Average term contact = 18)

**Note:** Community B’s contact is only counted for 3 terms because playgroup program was taken over by community women at the start of 1999 and they took over record keeping.

### Table App.3  Community C - Raw Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Age at June 1998 Yr.mth</th>
<th>Consent given by:</th>
<th>Child Assessed?</th>
<th>Number of project contacts (out of a possible 18)</th>
<th>Languages spoken at home (as identified by parent)</th>
<th>Parent interview?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Anmattyere Some English</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Aunty Mother</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Anmattyere</td>
<td>Aunty Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Aunty Mother</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Anmattyere</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Mother F</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Anmattyere</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Aunty Mother</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Anmattyere</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Mother M</td>
<td>Yes Checklist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anmattyere Some Warlpiri</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANT CONTACTS:**

(49)

(Average term contact = 12.25)

---

† This child lived at Community C at the beginning of the project and then moved to Community B.

32 The term ‘Aunty Mother’ used by the women in Central Australia meant the woman who was raising the child and was sister to the biological mother.