This chapter explores the ways in which Aboriginal Australian children are imagined by children who are part of mainstream Australian society and the ways in which Aboriginal children imagine both themselves and their mainstream peers. These imaginings are expressed in the form of drawings.

**TERMINOLOGY**

In Australia the term ‘Indigenous’ is used to refer to two groups, Aboriginal Australians, whose traditional lands are on mainland Australia as well as on many of the larger off-shore islands, and Torres Strait Islanders. Although the word ‘Indigenous’ is widely used in reference to first peoples, it is not accepted by all Aboriginal Australians with people preferring to use local terms to speak of themselves and their community:

Some examples are Nyungar (south-west Western Australia), Murry (eastern Queensland), Nunga (South Australia), Palawa (Tasmania), Yolnugu (Northern Territory – north-east Arnhem land), Koorie (Victoria and New South Wales).

(Jonas & Langton, 1994)

The community in which the drawings from Aboriginal children were collected is located in Arnhem Land. The people refer to themselves as Yolnugu and this is the term used throughout in discussion of this community and its people.

The term ‘remote community’ is used to describe the location of the Yolnugu community. This is an official term defined by the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC). It classifies areas sharing common characteristics of remoteness (including access to services) into six broad geographical areas or Remoteness Areas. The remoteness of a point is increased by its physical distance by road to the nearest urban area (ABS, March 2011).

**BACKGROUND**

There are an estimated 517,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, 2.5% of the total Australian population. Children and young people
represent more than half of the total population. The average age of 21 years is much lower than that of non-Indigenous people (37 years). This relatively young age is due mainly to higher fertility and mortality rates. The population is largely urbanised with 32% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in major cities, 44% in regional areas and 24% in remote parts of Australia. The uneven distribution of population in Australia, with the majority of the population living in large cities on the eastern seaboard and relatively small numbers of people in remote and very remote areas means that, although a larger proportion of the Aboriginal population live in major cities, they represent only 1% of the population in these areas. In very remote communities they are 50% or more of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011).

There are decreasing but still very significant differences in the educational achievements of mainstream and Aboriginal Australian children. These children ‘remain the most educationally disadvantaged in the country with educational outcomes, school retention rates and the completion of tertiary education well below those non-Indigenous peers’ (Santoro & Reid, 2006, p. 289). Indigenous students in remote community schools are even more disadvantaged than their peers in regional and city centres. According to nation wide tests of literacy and numeracy, more than 50% of Indigenous students in remote Indigenous schools fail to reach minimum standards in writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and numeracy in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Hughes & Hughes, 2010). Other studies suggest that between 70 to 80% of children in these schools are below national standards (The Australian, April 29, 2010). A large gap remains at higher levels of attainment. In 2008, non-Indigenous adults were more likely to have attained at least Year 10 or basic vocational qualifications (92%) than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults (71%), and were over four times as likely to have attained a Bachelor degree or higher (ABS, 2011). Despite the worryingly low levels of literacy achievement in remote communities, there are indicators that children in such communities are, in many ways, more resilient than those living in the city. A study conducted by the ABS found that:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in remote areas who speak an Indigenous language are less likely to experience risk factors associated with poor wellbeing, according to a report released today by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. (ABS 50/2011)

The report found that almost half of all young people in remote areas spoke an Indigenous language. These young people were less likely to engage in high risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use, than those who did not speak an Indigenous language. They were also less likely to report being a victim of physical violence. The study suggests that closer connection to culture as indicated by levels of first language use results in a more secure sense of identity and, as a result, less likelihood of negative behaviours.