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Walk Beside Me, Learn Together: A Service-Learning Immersion to a Remote Aboriginal School and Community

Associate Professor Shane Lavery, *The University of Notre Dame Australia*

Dr Glenda Cain, *The University of Notre Dame Australia*

Mr Patrick Hampton, *The University of Notre Dame Australia*

Corresponding author: Dr Glenda Cain glenda.cain@nd.edu.au

Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the potential of a service-learning immersion program to promote pre-service teachers' development of cultural competency in the area of Aboriginal education. That is, the research focused on ways the immersion program helped pre-service teachers (a) develop awareness of cultural implications in teaching in a remote school and (b) understand and respect Aboriginal people with a view to reconciliation. The program has operated since 2013 and occurs in a remote Aboriginal school and community in Western Australia. The duration of the immersion is eight days and is open to early childhood, primary and secondary pre-service teachers. The underlying epistemology of the research is constructivist, specifically interpretivist in nature, with a symbolic interactionist lens. That is, the research attempts to 'give voice' to the participants through their own language. Content analysis was the methodology used to explore the pre-service teachers' experiences and perceptions while undertaking their service-learning immersion. Data collection methods included focus group interviews, participant journals and a questionnaire. These data were collected over a four-year span from 2014 to 2017. The findings indicate that the service-learning immersion has enabled pre-service teachers to explore their interests and passion to teach Aboriginal students in both rural and remote locations.

Keywords: service-learning immersion, Aboriginal education, pre-service teacher education, remote teaching.

Introduction

One of the most exciting elements of working with pre-service teachers in a teacher education course must be assisting these young people to develop into highly accomplished teachers who are classroom ready to enter the teaching profession. Within the Australian context, an essential element of initial teacher preparation is the development of cultural competence in Aboriginal education. Gower and Byrne (2011) define cultural competency as the development of "an informed position based on an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal issues, culture and way of life that enables confident and effective interaction with Aboriginal people and the wider society" (p.380). Cultural competence is a requirement for the accreditation of all initial teacher education programs. Specifically, these standards demand that teachers demonstrate "strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander students", and "promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australian" through understanding and respect (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011, pp. 9-11).

An experiential service-learning immersion forms one method used in the School of Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia to aid pre-service teachers in becoming culturally competent in the area of Aboriginal education. The aim of the service-learning immersion is for pre-service teachers to learn from the school staff and community members, contribute to the school and community, and by so doing develop an insight into what it means to teach in a remote Aboriginal school and an appreciation of the need to provide all children with a good education, irrespective of race or locality. This article focuses on the experiences and perceptions of primary, early childhood and secondary pre-service teachers who have participated in an eight-day service-learning immersion in a remote Aboriginal school and community in Western Australia. Comments from the school principals have also been sought. These data were collected over a four-year period from 2014 to 2017. This research follows an initial pilot study of the experiences of the six pre-service teachers who undertook the first immersion in 2013 (Lavery, Cain & Hampton, 2014).

Review of Literature

Two key areas of literature serve to inform this research into the experiences of pre-service teachers undertaking a service-learning immersion in a remote Aboriginal school and community in Western Australia. These are the importance of pre-service teacher preparation for teaching Aboriginal students and the key pedagogical components of service-learning.

Pre-service Teacher Education within the Context of Aboriginal Education

University pre-service teacher educators have a critical responsibility to ensure they prepare high quality graduate teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills to address the inequity in educational outcomes for remote students (Herbert, 2015). The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2016) also identifies the critical role of teachers in improving educational outcomes in remote schools. This research concludes that teachers need to be contextually and culturally competent. In particular, teachers in remote schools need to “*understand their own culture, privilege the culture in which they work, facilitate use of local languages and involve local knowledge in teaching and learning*” (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2016, p. 87). The challenge for pre-service teacher educators remains the provision of a program that provides opportunities for graduating teachers to attain the understanding and skills that empower them to be culturally competent teachers.

Graduate Standards 1.4 and 2.4 in the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011) reflect the need to deliver pre-service teacher programs to equip remote school teachers to become culturally competent in their interactions with Indigenous students, parents and communities. While these *National Professional Standards for Teachers* are a requirement for the accreditation of pre-service teacher programs, the standards do not prescribe how universities deliver this content within a given program. Consequently, university pre-service teacher programs utilise a variety of approaches. As Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk and Robinson (2012) observe, “*there appears to be no recognizable overarching approach to Indigenous content provision nationally.*” One prevalent approach that universities use to address the standards is by offering mandatory “Aboriginal Studies” or “Indigenous Culture” courses within teacher education programs (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012). While research indicates these courses have a largely positive effect on the self-efficacy and attitudes of pre-service teachers (Craven, Marsh, & Mooney, 2003), there is a lack of evidence in the literature to conclude these courses alone will lead to the improvement of educational outcomes for Indigenous students (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012).

There is a need for a balance of learning for pre-service teacher training to fully meet the requirements of the *National Professional Standards for Teachers*, and more importantly, to overcome the inequity in educational outcomes for Indigenous children, (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, & Robinson, 2012). The literature recognizes pre-service teachers' need for a deep understanding of, and appreciation for Indigenous peoples' culture and history. Pre-service teacher programs must also seek to provide a balance of content that ensures culturally competent approaches to pedagogy and community engagement are equally in focus. Experiential learning, whether through work-placed learning, professional practicum or service-learning immersions are essential for pre-service teachers to fully engage with Aboriginal students and provide an appropriate teaching and learning program.

This university advocates the use of a workplace-learning model to provide opportunities for students to participate in experiential learning. These experiences are part of the mandated professional practicum or may be enhanced by additional service-learning opportunities where teaching is combined with authentic service. Professional experience placement and service-learning immersions in remote schools can provide a holistic experience that gives pre-service teachers opportunities to acquire the skills and understandings required to attain pedagogical strategies for teaching Indigenous students (Herbert, 2015). Additionally, the remote placement is recognised as an effective means for pre-service teachers to gain in-depth experience in building the relationships that are essential to establishing the respect and trust needed for culturally competent teaching. Essential to the outcome of the professional experience is the accompanying critical reflective practice and discussion with supervising teachers. Similarly, the benefits of a remote school experience are enhanced when partnerships connect the pre-service teacher to teachers with highly developed teaching practices and relational capacities (Herbert, 2015; Le Cornu 2015). A well-supported professional experience also provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to focus on both the attainment of appropriate pedagogy and on the skills and attributes required for culturally competent community engagement. Critical reflection and discussion, professional partnerships, and reciprocity are all key elements of a service-learning placement. This research into a service-learning immersion in a remote Aboriginal community explores the impact on pre-service teachers into what it means to teach in a remote Aboriginal school and the need to provide all children with a good education, irrespective of race or locality.

Service-Learning Immersion

Definitions of service-learning can differ slightly among practitioners. One definition provided by the National Service Learning Clearinghouse proposes that service-learning is “*a teaching and learning strategy integrating meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities*” (Ryan, 2012, p. 3). Such a definition highlights the pedagogical nature of service-learning where teaching is combined with authentic service, there is a reflective component and a clear sense of engagement with the community. Underpinning this definition is the need to develop mutually beneficial partnerships between those offering the service and those receiving the service. It is a concept of reciprocity which dictates that all who participate in the service-learning process benefit, all are learners and all can learn (Jacoby, 1996). Moreover, irrespective of whatever educational level (tertiary, secondary or primary), service-learning course outcomes are linked to real community needs that are designed in cooperation with community partners and service recipients (Colorado State University, 2017). Service-learning thus engages students in partnership activities that emphasise student learning and address community needs.

A service-learning immersion extrapolates the service-learning experience from possibly a morning or afternoon session a week to a substantially longer time period. By its very nature, the immersion process gives students a more sustained hands-on learning experience in an area

that is potentially outside of their comfort zone (Colby, Bercaw, Clark & Galiardi, 2009). Service-learning immersions can vary in length, intention and can take place within a national or international context. Three examples from the literature serve to illustrate the diverse nature of service-learning immersions. The first entails undergraduate students from a college in upstate New York participating in a service-learning immersion program in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, organising and implementing health clinics in collaboration with local community members (Kiely, 2004). The second involves Australian pre-service teachers undertaking a three-week, cross-cultural service-learning immersion to an internationally displaced people's camp in Kenya. Here, participants worked in a local school, a home for orphaned children and in the camp (Kearney, Perkins & Maakrun, 2014). A third example is the case of baccalaureate nursing students from universities in California who used their nursing skills and collaborative abilities during short-term international service-learning immersions in such locations as Mexico, Belize, Lesotho, Vietnam, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Swaziland and Ghana (Kohlbray, 2016). In each of these examples, participants operated in unaccustomed environments where they provided important service and demonstrated significant learning (Kearney, Perkins & Maakrun, 2014; Kiely, 2004; Kohlbray, 2016).

Aim and Significance

The underlying aim of this study was to explore the potential of a service-learning immersion program to promote pre-service teachers' development of cultural competence in the area of Aboriginal education. That is, the research focused on ways the immersion program helped pre-service teachers (a) develop awareness of cultural implications in teaching in a remote school and (b) understand and respect Aboriginal people with a view to reconciliation. In the light of the aim of the research there was one research question: In what ways can a service-learning immersion program promote pre-service teachers' development of cultural competence in the area of Aboriginal education?

The significance of the study is two-fold. Firstly, the results have the potential to add to the body of knowledge on the value of experiential learning in the development of pre-service teacher cultural competences in the field of Aboriginal education. Secondly, the research has the capacity to identify means by which the service-learning immersion can be improved and refined to better support pre-service teachers' development of cultural competences.

Context

Tjuntjuntjara Service-Learning Immersion

The Tjuntjuntjara remote Aboriginal service-learning immersion stemmed from a discussion in 2012 between the authors and 'Wilbur', the incoming principal of the Tjuntjuntjara Remote Aboriginal School. The authors wished to provide a service-learning immersion for pre-service teachers within a remote Aboriginal context. 'Wilbur' expressed considerable interest in developing a partnership with the University. As a result, the School of Education in conjunction with the Tjuntjuntjara Remote Aboriginal School and Community has run an annual 8-day immersion program since 2013. There were five reasons why the authors ultimately choose the Tjuntjuntjara remote Aboriginal community and school as a placement conducive for a service-learning immersion. The community is one of Australia's most remote Aboriginal communities (Wynn, 2012). The school had a stable leadership. The community was safe. The service-learning program offered mutual benefits to both the school and to the pre-service teachers. Finally, the principal, Wilbur, was keen to promote the idea of teaching in rural and remote regions.

The authors and the school principal on behalf of the remote Aboriginal community negotiated six specific goals linked to the Remote Aboriginal community service-learning immersion. These

were: (a) to increase firsthand knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and the contemporary situation with a specific focus on the 'Spinifex People' from the remote Aboriginal community; (b) to increase knowledge and understanding of living and working in a remote indigenous community; (c) to increase knowledge and understanding of teaching in a remote indigenous community; (d) to support the learning of the Remote Aboriginal community children; (e) to enhance the physical development of the Remote Aboriginal Community School; and (f) to provide a positive and enjoyable experience for the pre-service teachers in a remote community setting. Many of these goals are equally applicable to staff who accompany and mentor the pre-service teachers.

In the light of the six specific goals, the service-learning immersion program embodies three main components. The first involves pre-service teachers working with children in a classroom setting, either one-to-one or in small groups, with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The second entails pre-service teachers undertaking service activities within the school. Such activities included installing a playground, beautification of outdoor areas and painting classrooms. The third focuses on cultural learning through visiting the Women's Centre, finding and cooking traditional foods with the aid of local community members, learning to buy and prepare a meal with a restricted 'remote' budget, and sleeping under the stars in swags on multiple nights. The intended attitudes and skills for participating pre-service teachers include an understanding of their own culture, the ability to appreciate and value the Aboriginal culture in which they work, and the capacity to involve local knowledge in teaching and learning. These cultural competencies link directly to the *National Professional Standards for Teachers, Graduate Standards 1.4 and 2.4* (AITSL, 2011) and the recommendations for remote teachers provided by Guenther, Disbray, and Osborne (2016).

Pre-service teachers were guided to learn the intended attitudes and skills using four of five interdependent stages associated with implementing a service-learning program: preparation, action, reflection and demonstration (Kaye, 2014). Preparation entailed pre-immersion readings that provided a background to the Tjuntjuntjara community and school, and two pre-immersion meetings at which pre-service teachers shared reasons for undertaking the immersion and staff outlined expectations and responsibilities. Action involved pre-service teachers undertaking classroom-based experiences, service activities in the school and cultural learning through engagement with local community members. Reflection took the form of regular evening debriefing sessions facilitated by the school principal and university staff. Demonstration required pre-service teachers to document their experiences and learning in a service-learning journal on a daily basis during the immersion using guided reflection questions. On returning to the University, pre-service were invited to share their immersion experiences with their colleagues and staff in a focus group session or on a one-to-one basis with staff.

Tjuntjuntjara Remote Aboriginal Community

The Tjuntjuntjara remote Aboriginal community is located 700 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie in the Great Victoria Desert. The community has a population of approximately 160 people and maintains many of the traditional cultural practices of the people known as Pilanguiu, meaning "from the spinifex plains". Most of the community members speak the Pitjantjatjara language, with English frequently the third or fourth language spoken. Community art projects are a central focus of the community, with areas specifically designated to 'Men's Business' and 'Women's Business'. The remote Aboriginal community school caters from Kindergarten to lower secondary, with an enrolment of around 35 students. There are four staff members, the Principal, two class teachers, and one support staff member, all of whom live in the community. Several local community members work in the school as Aboriginal Indigenous Education Officers

supporting learning in the classroom and teaching language lessons. Teaching occurs in both standard Australian English and in the Pitjantjatjara language.

Participants

Forty-one pre-service teachers have participated in the immersion experience from 2014 to 2017. All are volunteers. These participants fall into three service categories: (a) those undertaking the immersion to fulfil the service component of a service-learning unit; (b) those undertaking the immersion subsequent to completing a service-learning unit; and (c) those undertaking the immersion as a service experience. All participants are required to keep a journal during the immersion and all are invited to a final debriefing and celebration session.

Prior to the commencement of the immersion, the authors conduct two orientation sessions to familiarise participants with the specific historical, social and cultural context of the Tjuntjuntjara community. Participants are required to consider the unique language, history and cultural protocols of the Tjuntjuntjara community. In doing so they are able to deepen their understanding of the Pilanguiu people and through reflection identify the diverse and unique nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. Comments made during these sessions have indicated that all participants have had little or no contact with Aboriginal people from remote regions. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

Table 1: Immersion Participants

Year	Primary	Early Childhood	Secondary	Total
2014	8	2	1	11
2015	7	-	3	10
2016	5	2	1	8
2017	12	-	-	12
Total	32	4	5	41

The school principal's perceptions also form part of this study. The authors work closely with the school principal in the preparation and running of each year's immersion program. As such the authors have always sought the school principal's observations once a program finished. In three of those years, 'Wilbur' provided feedback. In 2015, when Wilbur was on long service leave, 'Dan', the acting principal, obliged.

Research Design

Theoretical Framework

The epistemological approach underpinning the study is constructivism. Constructivist researchers often address the process of interaction among individuals where the goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on participants' views of the situation being studied. Typically, the research approach is qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2014). The specific qualitative tradition that underscores this inquiry is that of interpretivism. The goal of interpretive social science is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it. Interpretive inquiry strives to discover what is meaningful or relevant to people being studied and tries to gain a feel for their social reality (Neuman, 2006). This inquiry attempts to explore and understand the lived experience of undertaking a service-learning immersion in a remote Aboriginal community and school from those most intimately associated with it – the pre-

service teachers undertaking the immersion. Human Research Ethical clearance was obtained for undertaking the study.

Data Collection

There were three components to the data collection. The first involved data that were collected from pre-service teachers following the immersion. Specifically, data were collected from the pre-service teachers in the form of guided journal writing and either one-to-one or focus group interviews. Pre-service teachers began writing their journals during the immersion, usually in the evening, and completed them post-immersion. The journal questions are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Journal Questions

1. What impacted me in a positive way today?
2. What impacted me in a challenging way today?
3. What am I learning about myself as a teacher?
4. What am I learning about teaching in a remote Aboriginal school?
5. What am I learning personally about myself
6. What questions arise for me so far?

The interviews occurred post immersion and pre-service teachers could choose to be interviewed one-to-one or in a focus group. The interview questions are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Interview Questions

1. What have been some of your experiences participating in a remote Aboriginal community and school?
2. What do you believe you gained from these experiences?
3. What challenges have you faced?
4. What insights have you gained working with Aboriginal students?
5. What do you believe is important in teaching in an Indigenous school?
6. What did you learn about literacy learning/teaching?
7. What did you learn about yourself as a teacher?
8. How has the experience impacted on you personally?
9. How has the experience impacted on your professionally?
10. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the experience?

The second component to the data collection entailed data that the principal provided each year in the form of a letter to the authors. Each year Wilbur (or Dan in 2015) would write to the authors following the immersion, where he would reflect on the impact of the immersion from the perspective of the school and community. The third component comprised written responses from former pre-service teacher participants who had since graduated and are now teaching. Responses were framed around guiding questions that sought to elicit the impact of the Tjuntjuntjara immersion on the preparedness of the participants to teach in their current location (Table 4). Five former participants responded to this invitation in 2017 to reflect on the more long-term impact of their service-learning at Tjuntjuntjara.

Table 4: Guideline Questions for Former Participants

1. Thinking back over your Tjuntjuntjara experience, what still comes to mind: impressions, experiences, challenges, feelings, emotions?
2. In what ways, if at all, has the Tjuntjuntjara immersion influenced your preparedness to teach in your current location?
3. In what ways, if at all, has the Tjuntjuntjara immersion influenced your preparedness to teach in a rural or remote region?
4. Any other comments you might like to add?

Data Analysis

Content analysis was the process used to explore the pre-service teachers' experiences and perceptions while undertaking their service-learning immersion. Berg (2007) describes content analysis as “a careful, detailed systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings” (p. 303). The journals, interview transcripts and other written responses from the pre-service teachers were examined for themes, patterns, topics, and shared mind-sets.

The format for analysing the data followed that described by Miles and Huberman (1994). That is, data collection, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. First, researchers read the pre-service teacher journals, interview transcripts and questionnaires. Second, the data was reduced through identifying emerging themes where each researcher selected specific segments of language that emphasised particular themes. Finally, these segments were visually displayed under each theme heading whereby all researchers viewed the lists and collectively selected appropriate exemplars of each theme. In similar manner, content analysis was used to appraise the letters written by the two principals.

Generalisability

Generalisability is concerned with the capacity of research to be transferable to other settings and contexts (Punch, 1998). It is a term used in a limited way in qualitative research given the focus of qualitative research is not to generalise findings to individuals or places outside of those under study (Creswell, 2014). With respect to this research, the question is whether one can generalise what has been learnt from pre-service teachers undertaking service-learning immersions with the Spinifex people to a generic ‘remote’ experience? In this regard, Melrose (2009) pointed to naturalistic generalisation as a means by which readers can gain insight by considering the details and descriptions presented in particular cases. This research provides a context to the research in terms of the goals of the service immersion, a description of the Tjuntjuntjara community and an outline of the participants of the study. The research findings are presented principally through the voice of the participants. The onus is with the reader to carefully and critically gauge how and in what ways the particular details and comments presented in this study may be used to inform theory and practice in other contexts.

Findings

The key findings of this research highlight ways the service-learning immersion has promoted pre-service teachers' development of cultural competence in the area of Aboriginal education.

Five themes are presented, based on an analysis of the interview transcripts and the review of pre-service teachers' journals. These are: appreciation of the remoteness of the school and community; classroom experiences; Aboriginal culture; importance of relationships; and implications for future teaching.

Appreciation of the Remoteness of the School and Community

In undertaking the journey to Tjuntjuntjara each year, pre-service teachers travel 6 hours on the Prospector Train from Perth to Kalgoorlie and then in 4WD vehicles to the community. As much of the road is unsealed, the 660-kilometre journey from Kalgoorlie to Tjuntjuntjara can take up to 10 hours dependent on road conditions, and requires an overnight camp in the bush en route. The experience of travelling in this way has made pre-service teachers appreciate the meaning of remoteness. As one pre-service teacher commented,

I think the train and the drive did it by itself, being so far from civilisation. You see a good starry night and it makes you know what remote is. I don't think you get to know what it (remoteness) is exactly unless you have been there and done it personally.

Another pre-service teacher remarked about having "no mobile phones"; this reality reinforced the isolation and remoteness of the community. Many of the pre-service teachers found the lack of access to mobile phones "quite therapeutic" in the freedom they felt of not being so connected to their mobile devices. Others initially found the lack of access quite challenging and needed to adjust to this situation for the duration of the immersion. It also made the pre-service teachers appreciate how fortunate they were to have so many services and resources available to them on a daily basis. As one pre-service teacher commented in 2015: "arriving in the tight-knit community, I was met with the harsh realities the Tjuntjuntjara people face on a daily basis - a testament to their incredible resilience." She concluded that from this experience she had a "much greater appreciation, respect and understanding of the effort involved in operating a remote community school." She felt inspired by the children in the school "who despite all of the challenges, still manage to learn and succeed."

Classroom Experiences

A key aspect of the service-learning immersion each year was the opportunity for pre-service teachers to observe and participate in the classroom learning program. It is a routine part of the learning curriculum in the Tjuntjuntjara Community School for the students to be in the classrooms for four days of the week, with the fifth day being a "bush day". On this "bush day" the Principal, staff and local elders take the students to country to engage in traditional cultural lessons that may include *maku* gathering, cooking and hunting. The pre-service teachers were also included in the "bush day" and the experience prompted some deep reflection on the learning program and behaviour being observed. As one pre-service teacher commented,

I think there can be a stigma in schools about Indigenous children being hard to handle. Yet when we got out in the bush the Aboriginal students were in their own community and they were so curious, always polite, and there was a difference in behaviour.

Another pre-service teacher shared that there was a real "community feel. The school is part of the community to a big degree."

There was recognition of the many challenges that teachers faced in classrooms in a remote school like Tjuntjuntjara. Such challenges included the diversity of learning needs and ages in the one classroom. Teachers taught students with age differences of up to four years, with most students having limited Standard Australian English. These students were strong in their home

language and frequently engaged in animated conversations. At times the local Aboriginal teacher assistant would need to interpret the conversation for the teacher. One pre-service teacher felt she would need to *"learn from the students first, as the methods we have in our current tool box might not work, and may not meet their needs. I would need to throw my preconceptions out the window."* Another pre-service teacher acknowledged that classroom management would be a *"huge learning curve"* as her observations made her realise she would need to *"research a lot more about how to deal with keeping the class focussed and engaged in learning."* These observations reinforced for many pre-service teachers the need to learn from the students and community as to the best ways to cater for student learning in such a remote context.

The pre-service teachers very much appreciated the opportunity to observe and participate in the classrooms at Tjuntjuntjara. They reflected on the similarities and differences between their classroom experiences, acknowledging the opportunity to learn from all these experiences.

Aboriginal Culture

Pre-service teachers in each year of the immersion have been overwhelming in their feedback as to the importance of the Indigenous culture to the Tjuntjuntjara people. As one pre-service teacher described,

the depth of the community's culture and their connection to the land stirred up a sense of wonder in me. I saw the Spinifex People having been in this land for time immemorial, knowing the land so intimately that they were aware of the ancient history of their land.

Another pre-service teacher observed the Tjuntjuntjara children and remarked, *"how proud they were of their culture and of their land."* The knowledge of culture and country was particularly evident on the "bush day". The children wanted to share all they knew about the land and were eager to show their skills and knowledge. As one pre-service teacher commented, *"they were teaching us words off their own back. They were proud to tell us about their country, their people and their family. It was probably the highlight for me."* For another pre-service teacher, the bush experience affirmed the deep connection between Aboriginal people and *"how strong that culture is with land and family."* He did not realise the extent of this connection until he experienced it first-hand out in the remote desert community of Tjuntjuntjara.

The firsthand experience of being in a remote Aboriginal community often made pre-service teachers comment in similar ways: *"The experience has opened my eyes to learning about the Aboriginal culture."* And another, *"until you actually go and see, rather than just attending lectures and listening to speakers, it is not possible to understanding Aboriginal culture."* This student admitted that going on the immersion engaged him in wanting to learn more and to *"see the other point of view"* in the debates and discussions related to Aboriginal people. It was also helping him to make greater connections between his unit of study and the lived experience of the people of the Tjuntjuntjara Community. Another pre-service teacher described her adventure to the remote community of Tjuntjuntjara as a *"profound experience."* She added that the journey was *"incredibly multi-dimensional as there were so many new things to take in and absorb."* These experiences included living in a remote community, interacting with elders and community members, engaging with the Aboriginal children, listening to the traditional language of Pitjantjatjara and participating in hunting and bush craft. All the pre-service teachers across each year have viewed the immersion as a privilege to be welcomed and to live in this remote Aboriginal community. As one pre-service teacher stated, *"I think experiencing the culture first hand and being immersed in it is beneficial for me as a person. Having a little bit more of an*

understanding of Aboriginal students is really helpful. There is so much more to learn." Many pre-service teachers observed and expressed the view that the traditional cultural roles were a clear reality in the Tjuntjuntjara community.

Importance of Relationships

Each year of the immersion, pre-service teachers have highlighted the importance of relationships. These relationships have developed across a number of difference groups. Firstly, there was anecdotal evidence of the relationships that were developed between the pre-service teachers as they participated in the weeklong immersion. Secondly, reflections from the pre-service teachers captured the relationships that they established with the Tjuntjuntjara children whilst in the school and community. The third aspect pertained to the development of relationships between the pre-service teachers, the school staff and community of Tjuntjuntjara. Finally, the Notre Dame Staff and the pre-service teachers commented on the development of positive relationships that resulted from undertaking the service-learning immersion. Each of these areas are now explored.

Over the four years of the service-learning immersions to Tjuntjuntjara a special bond has developed between the pre-service teachers during each year of the immersions as they spend many hours in each other's company. This relationship is captured in the words of one pre-service teacher where she stated, *"I wish everyone could experience what I experienced because it was so amazing."* She made the observation that the 7 strangers from the train were *"now 7 new friends which is great. I think everyone should do it."* The following year, another pre-service teacher stated that *"going away for a whole week with 10 other people, was a challenge and quite difficult."* However, she added, *"I actually loved reminding myself of the importance of everyone dipping in and being with a group and working together."* The demands of the service-learning immersion are extensive. Each year the authors have been inspired as to how the various groups have melded together to make the most of the opportunity.

There are so many stories over the years that capture the special relationship that has evolved between the pre-service teachers and the Tjuntjuntjara children and community. For example, one pre-service teacher concluded, *"relationships are an absolute must."* She had observed some of the children playing football in the morning before school had begun. When the school siren rang, the teacher took time to talk with the students and made them feel that he *"really wanted them to be there in the classroom. I thought that was amazing. It taught me a lot about my relationship with children at school."*

A key component of the service-learning immersion over the four years has been the opportunity for the pre-service teachers to see first-hand how teachers support the learning of the Tjuntjuntjara children in the classroom. This relationship of respect and trust forms the basis of the Pitjantjatjara termed *"Tjarpanyi"* meaning *"learning together"*. The teachers openly shared their classrooms to assist the learning of the pre-service teachers. In return, the pre-service teachers happily and actively engaged with the children and supported the teachers in the classroom program. As one pre-service teacher stated, *"I could rapidly appreciate the demands placed on teachers when catering for the diverse range of abilities in the classroom."* He added, *"one lesson that struck me was that learning related to the way the people of Tjuntjuntjara viewed their past and present as part of the same story."* He also concluded that the staff and community encouraged the view that *"a good education can help children maintain a strong connection to the traditions of the Tjuntjuntjara people whilst promoting a strong present for a bright future."* As a Notre Dame Staff member stated, *"In Tjuntjuntjara we have remarkable people committed to teaching remarkable kids, and for our students to witness and become part of the learning, even for a short time, is a rare privilege."* It is through the strengthening of the relationship between the Tjuntjuntjara community and the University of Notre Dame staff and students over the years that

the outcomes of the service-learning immersion continue to deepen and have a lasting impact.

The opportunity for the pre-service teachers and university staff to interact together in an environment well beyond the walls of the traditional institution provides the chance for relationships to evolve in less formal ways. A comment from another Notre Dame staff member illustrates this point: *"To learn along-side our UNDA students gives us the chance to see their many skills and talents as young teachers committed to reconciliation. Their passion to become teachers who'll make a difference is inspiring."* There have been many occasions over the years when students who had been a part of a service-learning immersion to Tjuntjuntjara have made contact with Notre Dame Staff members who had accompanied them on this experience. Moreover, many pre-service teachers who have now graduated continue to communicate with the staff and share the journey they are undertaking and their passion for teaching. Frequently the graduates pay tribute to the relationships they have built with the UNDA staff and the many experiences of the Tjuntjuntjara adventure.

Implications for Preparedness for Remote Teaching

Pre-service teachers and newly graduated teachers expressed a range of views when asked the question: *"In what ways, if at all has the Tjuntjuntjara immersion influenced your preparedness to teach in a rural or remote location?"* There was a continuum of responses from those who stated directly that they could not consider teaching in a rural or remote school, to those who actually accepted and were currently teaching in such a location.

One pre-service teacher shared that the immersion had certainly *"given me a little bit of an insight into what it is actually like in a remote school"* but that it was too isolated for her. She felt that her strong connection to her family would make it *"tough for me, going somewhere I can't have them come with me."* Another pre-service stated her willingness to explore the possibilities of teaching in a rural or remote school, however she expressed mixed emotions. *"I could definitely go out there in the remote. I think it would be amazing, but I think I would get very lonely too."* A third pre-service teacher acknowledged that she would consider a position in a rural or remote school, but only when she had graduated. She felt that a practicum in such a location would be too stressful and she *"would need to be able to go home."* However once fully qualified she believed she would be able to accept a position in a rural or remote school.

Many pre-service teachers shared that the Tjuntjuntjara service-learning immersion had made them consider teaching in a rural or remote school. As one pre-service commented, *"In terms of impact, the Tjuntjuntjara experience is quite high."* He qualified this comment with the statement, *"It reinforces my desire to get out of the city to teach anywhere, more so with Aboriginal kids as well."* Another pre-service teacher added, *"I never considered teaching in a remote location, and that was the reason why I came on the immersion."* He noted furthermore, *"I definitely want to do this and to work with Indigenous kids. I would love to teach in a community like that."* Yet another pre-service teacher stated, *"The immersion has completely opened up my world to a whole new level of teaching."* One pre-service teacher added, *"I felt the immersion helped me prepare for the reality of teaching Indigenous students and living in a community that had a large Indigenous population."* This pre-service teacher then completed her practicum in a regional high school where 40% of students were Indigenous. In her final reflection she shared that *"the immersion also made me realise that I could happily teach in a rural school, although I would struggle to teach at a remote school long term."*

The opportunity of being in the Tjuntjuntjara School and Community has impacted the pre-service teachers across the years of the experience in many different ways. Indeed, some pre-service teachers who have now graduated have accepted teaching positions in rural and remote schools. Of particular interest to this study has been the appointment of two graduating teachers to the

Tjuntjuntjara School Community. In 2015, an early childhood graduate teacher, who had excelled in her participation in the service-learning immersion, accepted a position as a support teacher and the Playgroup facilitator at the Titji Kulunpa (Women's Centre). She commented: *"I was offered a position after participating in the service-learning program. I 'jumped' at the opportunity and had a wonderful experience living and teaching in Tjuntjuntjara."* She acknowledged that there were many challenges in teaching but *"the time spent with the children singing, reading, learning, guiding and having adventures in the 'bush' on 'culture Fridays' outweighed the challenges."* She commented further, *"I especially loved going out bush and sitting with the children and the oldies."* This graduate teacher stated that *"teaching is very much a social partnership where building and maintaining relationships is at the core of education."* Her experience in teaching Indigenous has opened many opportunities and she acknowledges, *"My experience in Tjuntjuntjara was the beginning of the realisation that with an open mind, a loving heart and head switched on teachers can make a positive impact."* She has now accepted a permanent position teaching Indigenous adults studying vocational course in Perth, many of whom come from very remote communities.

The journey of another pre-service teacher, who has since graduated, is also of specific interest to the impact of the service-learning immersion. In 2014, this pre-service teacher participated in the service-learning immersion to Tjuntjuntjara. As a follow up to this experience, in 2015 she then successfully completed her 10-week practicum at the Tjuntjuntjara School. She applied in 2017 to the remote teaching pool of the WA Department of Education and was appointed to a very remote school in the Pilbara. There was no vacancy at that time at the Tjuntjuntjara School, however in July 2017, she was able to transfer to Tjuntjuntjara. She is now employed at the school in the middle year's classroom. Her comments are insightful:

My Tjuntjuntjara experience was the reason I decided to teach in remote education. It opened up a completely new experience that I was not expecting to have. My time at Tjuntjuntjara was the best experience I have had and has been the greatest influence on my education career.

Other graduate teachers who were also involved in the service-learning immersion over time have used the experience to spring board their interests in rural and remote Indigenous teaching. Some of these graduates have accepted placements in schools throughout Western Australia, a number of which are in remote and rural locations.

Principals' Comments

Comments from the Wilbur, Principal of the Tjuntjuntjara School, in 2014 add credence to the impact of the service-learning immersion:

As a group of students, you were a privilege to have around as part of our school community. You demonstrated attributes that will hold you in good stead as you continue your learning and development and eventually in your life's work whatever this will be.

The Principal continued, *"You are nothing short of sensational. The act of service is a key component in remote schools as a basis for making a positive difference and maintains a focus on the task at hand."* Following another year's visit, Wilbur wrote:

The joint venture has had a significant impact on the individuals and on groups and demonstrate what can be done in collaboration with focus and energy. While it may seem a small project in a small community, I also see it as people working together to change our nation for the better.

He concluded, *"It is a small initiative with a big dream. It is part of the big picture. We are a nation. This joint venture is big!"* It is through such words of reflections that the full impact of the service-learning partnership is realised between the Tjuntjuntjara Community and School with the School of Education.

In 2015 the acting principal, 'Dan' sent a personal communication following that year's immersion experience where he acknowledged the developing partnership between UNDA and the remote community and school. Commenting on the range of projects undertaken, he stated: *"this service to the school is invaluable, probably 6 months' worth of weekend jobs done in a few days."* He remarked further, *"the visiting students gain a valuable insight into understanding and being aware of the cultural, physical, professional and personal rewards and challenges that come with remote teaching."* His final words highlight a key aspiration of this immersion program:

Remote schools need good teachers who can commit to providing the best education possible for their students in order to close the gap in Indigenous life outcomes. It is great to see a university such as Notre Dame raise the profile of teaching in remote schools and prepare their education students with the understanding and experience needed to achieve this.

Such an understanding of mutual benefits is reflective of the notion of reciprocity, a key component of service-learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The service-learning immersion in the remote school and community of Tjuntjuntjara has provided many opportunities for University of Notre Dame pre-service teachers to develop their cultural competence relevant to Aboriginal Education. Pre-service teachers expressed a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and the connection the Pilanguiu people have to country and place. In particular, the experience helped develop pre-service teachers' ability to appreciate and value the Aboriginal culture through face-to-face interaction with the Tjuntjuntjara elders, community members and students. Key to the experience was the opportunity to participate in traditional Aboriginal cultural practices through bush days, visits to the Women's Centre and the sharing of a meal with the Pilanguiu community. Further, through classroom and other related experiences, pre-service teachers gained an insight into what it means to teach in a remote Aboriginal school. They observed lessons where the children spoke in their home language and Aboriginal Teacher Assistants supported the class teacher through translation into Standard Australian English. Moreover, the children were enthusiastic in teaching Aboriginal words to the pre-service teachers, especially in everyday conversations. The immersion also highlighted the importance of building relationships with students, school staff, university staff, and the community. Service-learning provided the pedagogy that combined authentic service, teaching opportunities, reflective practices and community engagement. Over a four-year period the University of Notre Dame and Tjuntjuntjara Remote School and Community have sustained a mutually beneficial partnership through a service-learning model.

Three recommendations are made in the light of the research findings. Firstly, it is recommended that all pre-service teachers undertake extensive cultural awareness training within their degree. Many pre-service teachers in the study acknowledged the limitations of their knowledge of Aboriginal people and culture. Secondly, it is recommended that service-learning opportunities are incorporated into pre-service teaching courses wherever possible. Service-learning can consolidate pre-service teachers' skills and knowledge of educational practices, through structured opportunities of action and reflection. Finally, it is important that in future research,

the perspectives and insights of the Pilanguiu people are considered, both as co-participants and hosts of the program, to provide a more holistic appraisal of the service experience. In particular, what impact do these interactions have for the Pilanguiu people and their appreciation of Non-Indigenous people, their cultures and the Western education system? How does such an understanding compare and contrast with those of the non-Indigenous participants?

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