

THE ABORIGINAL PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' DECISIONS ABOUT LIVING AND WORKING IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT¹

In June 2008, 10 pre-service teachers and 2 teacher educators from Edith Cowan University (ECU) participated in an existing community education program in rural and remote Indigenous communities in central Australia. From an intrepid start with a mountain of overloaded baggage and camping cutlery setting off the scanning machine at the airport, these educational risk takers trekked off into the desert. Our explorers joined 60 pre-service teachers and several teacher educators from the Victoria University (VU) Story Writing in Rural Locations (SWIRL) project. This project has been operating annually for 14 years in communities around Alice Springs, some up to 400 km of dirt track away. This paper reports the powerful effect of a short lived experience on pre-service teachers' attitudes and experience of living and teaching in a remote community. The experience described here represents the beginning of an authentic approach to giving experiences to pre-service teachers which may support them to consider teaching in remote Indigenous communities as part of their teaching career.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the experience of a group of ten pre-service teacher and two university teacher educators on a visit to several Indigenous communities in central Australia as part of a group of Victorian and Western Australian undergraduates conducting a school holiday experiential literacy program for primary aged children. The pre-service teachers' narratives, the impact of the embedded experience and their emerging sense of themselves as teachers are captured in the retelling of the journey. The shared themes of the individual and the group combine to create a rich account of this unique approach to the professional experience in teacher education at Edith Cowan University. In this situation the preservice teachers have a first hand experience of Indigenous culture, teaching and living in a remote community. This not only extends their understanding of teaching as a profession, heightens their abilities to connect their teaching to the learning of schools, students and their communities for enhanced educational capital but also helps to inform decisions about where they will choose to teach when they graduate (Mahon and Cherednichenko 2007, Elliot 1993). The experience generated many

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conversations and stories, some of which are reported here. As pre-service teachers, and the teacher educators who accompanied them, talked and wrote their journals an informed reflective perspective emerged and the beginnings of reflexive professional practice is evident. The reader is invited to also learn from this re-telling, and asked not to judge any of the participants, their motives or views expressed here. Rather, it is hoped that all readers will relate to the experience and/or be challenged to consider their own perspectives, motives, values and educational practice.

PICK ME PLEASE!

Ten pre-service teachers from third year undergraduate programs at Edith Cowan University were chosen to participate based on an expression of interest. The nine female and one male pre-service teachers were chosen from a pool of 35 applicants who were asked to describe why they thought they could offer something positive to the children in the remote communities and what it was they expected to learn themselves. Two teacher educators completed the group and stayed with the groups in two communities. The university educators both had experience in working in the Northern Territory and specifically in remote communities. They volunteered for the experience knowing what was ahead of them. None of the preservice teachers had lived in a remote community, although some had either grown up in country towns, or had visited small communities before. Preparation sessions were conducted at the university prior to the trip and all students had completed studies in Aboriginal culture and knowledge.

Their initial written applications provided an insight into their interest in being part of the group and are an indication of initial expectations of themselves and the experience. These comments are from the expression of interests from preservice teachers and indicate the range of honest motives and knowledge brought to the work.

I am a mother of 3 young children and it has been a dream of both my husband and myself that when I graduate next year to commit ourselves to 2 years working remotely, giving ourselves an opportunity to give to a community and providing our own children with an enriching learning experience. (Tania)

I am interested in participating, as it is something very far removed from my own experiences and understanding. I feel that it would be instrumental in making me a better teacher and that it would also open my eyes to an environment I know little about and help me better understand the problems education, and society in general, currently face. (Melissa)

The project appeals to me because I am interested in working as a teacher in a remote community. The experience would give me a more sophisticated understanding of the specific cultural setting before I go out to teach in such a community. I know I would love teaching Indigenous children and helping them to discover a love of learning. (Kat)

The reasons given by the chosen applicants indicate that while some were keen to experience working in Aboriginal communities, some indicated that they had

already decided they would teach in Aboriginal communities after graduation. These students were seeking to build their understanding of what the experience might entail.

During the briefing prior to the trip, the participants met to get to know each other and discuss the project and the context of the visit. They were joining preservice teachers from another university and state who were already working in the communities. They examined their role as observers and participants in these existing teams, and discussed the storybook writing activities in which they would participate. They arranged the practicalities for the trip including equipment and resources. The pre-service teachers were set the task of beginning reflective journals to record their expectations and thoughts about the coming trip. These journals, drew on action research approaches (McTaggart 1993) and provided a critical window through which participants could rigorously inquire about the experience, stimulate new knowledge and theorise from experience (Beckett and Hagar 2001, Cochran and Lytle 2001) as they developed as reflective practitioners (Schon 1983).

SETTING OUT

The group left Perth in early July 2008 for Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The journey was planned to include some time for all the preservice teachers to get to know each other a little before joining the rest of the contingent and travelling to the remote locations to work with Indigenous children. The trip itself presented some exciting and challenging moments. During the first night at the camping ground Territory residents exploded left over fire crackers from their Territory Day celebrations. Tents were erected behind a fence less than two metres from the Stewart Highway, where trucks roared by at high speed, and over the road from the railway track, where trains laden with iron ore rolled by in the early hours of every morning. This situation gave the West Australian contingent an insight into a world and culture which was quite different to their experience in the Perth metropolis.

After joining the other university team, the whole group travelled by mini bus to Uluru. However as darkness fell a decision was made to stop one hour short of the Uluru destination to make camp for the night. This unexpected change to the plans again pushed travellers to the limit of comfort. While tents were pitched in the dark, a campfire built and sausages cooked, the participants had to draw on their reserves of character to cope in a very different environment to their usual day to day existence. Humour, group collaboration and team problem solving skills began to emerge as sleeping arrangements and the meal were organised.

The weekend trip to Uluru-KataTjuta National Park, for all participants, added to their understanding of the physical and spiritual context of the culture they were about to enter. In retrospect, visiting the cultural centre at the national park, learning about the culture, environment, stories and history of the local people had an important impact on all of us by providing a deeper understanding of Indigenous Australians. The importance of knowledge of culture and beliefs had a powerful impact on the following experience of living and working within an Indigenous community for the participants new to this experience.

NEW HOME, NEW EXPERIENCE, NEW LEARNING

On return to Alice Springs the large group separated to travel to even more distant communities. For the WA group these locations were Areyonga, Atijere and Ntaria where the next week was to be spent living and working in these communities. Willard-Holt (2001) claims that the impact of a short-term field-based experience can positively impact pre-service teachers both personally and professionally when it was found that, after spending a short time living and working in Mexico, pre-service teachers were less prone to prejudge children based on cultural and linguistic backgrounds and resulted in the altering of their preconceptions of other cultures. It was found that during this trip to the central Australian desert the pre-service teachers from Western Australia demonstrated that they were developing similar understandings.

In addition to working with local children during the day, the pre-service teachers participated in planned and informal discussions, facilitated by university staff, which focussed on their daily experiences. These included discussions around topics of difference between cultures and child rearing practices, use of language, use of literacy in the communities, and making sense of daily experiences. These powerful conversations provided an opportunity to guide personal reflections. The pre-service teachers commented that talking about the "deeper stuff", assisted them in understanding some of the issues in regard to the experience. The university staff drew upon their previous experience working in Indigenous communities and took on the explicit role of guide and facilitator for the pre-service teachers, giving them confidence to ask difficult questions and supporting them to explore experiences which were confronting of their personal understandings, values and expectations.

The commitment to this program for all the participants draws on the work of Dewey, Friere, Vygotsky and Giddens, among others, who have argued that the power of education is realised in learner-centred inquiry and knowledge development, informed action and individual agency. Recent work by Milne and Gabb (2005) demonstrates the need for university students to engage in experiential learning, connected to their vocational and professional aspirations as much as possible, if their university studies are to be authentic. After all, learning is... 'what students do with what they learn, when they can do what they want to do' (Eisner 2001, p. 371). Therefore, for the preservice teachers and the teacher educators who volunteered, their involvement enriched their university experience, provided authentic engagement with young people, enhanced their emerging professional skills and competencies and enabled them to articulate their own experience as knowledge (Newmann et al 1996). This experience built their personal educational capital and in doing so enabled them to be more effective teachers.

DATA AND FINDINGS

Journals kept by all participants were a focus of data collection and the data were analysed using collaborative practitioner research approaches which enable the participants to explore, analyse and generalise findings from their own data, so enriching their learning through the critical reflective practice (Cherednichenko and Kruger 2007). These reflective journals maintained by the participants show a

personal reflection about held attitudes and careful observation of ways in which Indigenous Australians learn and live, even though the experience was short. Also, where university staff were living with the pre-service teachers it was found that focussed observations and daily discussions or 'tutorials' (as they were called) at the end of the day's events assisted greatly in the pre-service teachers' articulation of their changing attitudes to the culture and family ways of being and knowing, of Indigenous Australian people.

I really appreciated witnessing how the children were able to code-switch so swiftly. I found it quite difficult during school to learn a second language, yet many of these children knew about 3 languages and children as young as 5 were able to speak to us fluently in English, then turn to their friends and resume speaking their home language, which in our community was Pitjantjatjara. (Emma)

Seeing how the children in the community just roamed and wandered from place to place, from very young ages, without their parents or any form of guardian gave me cause for reflection. It goes against my instinct about nurturing and loving children and I thought this was irresponsible parenting at first. However I came to understand and appreciate the way things were done. As a result of this parenting style the children were so much more independent and mature. It was amazing. A great example of this is when they came and taught us how to cook kangaroo tail. The younger girls from the community taught us, just by doing what they had seen their parents and community members doing. I thought it was amazing, and they do things with such confidence. (Carina)

Whilst initially I found it alarming that any child would be able to walk the streets at such a young age, but after taking a closer look on the situation and discussing it with my peers my view on the situation has changed. Whilst it may appear that children are unsupported, in fact all the children look after each other, with the older children taking on the responsibility of looking after the younger children, to ensure they are not hurt or to simply to teach the younger children new skills. (Amanda)

Although time spent living in the communities was limited, the pre-service teachers experienced a change in their understanding of the way in which the Indigenous children learnt and lived and the joys and hurdles experienced by the teachers working in these environments. During their reflections they considered topics such as, the quality of the literacy based activities and their developing knowledge of teaching literacy, cross-cultural differences, and the importance of recognising Aboriginal knowledge as the starting point for children's learning.

The children were teaching us how to pronounce different words in their language. They also made different bush tucker out of the play-dough such as grubs, honey ants and eggs. From the play-dough experience the children were experiencing and learning a new concept, but at the same time teaching us about their culture and traditions. I also found it amazing how well the children could code switch between their language and English. At one point during the play-dough making the children were happily talking amongst themselves in their

language and when I asked one child what they were talking about she replied telling me what they were talking about in very fluent English. (Carmel)

Reflecting on the play-dough experience made me start to compare other children which I have worked with to the children in Areyonga. It made me realise how self indulged and disrespectful some children are in the classroom and social situations. The children who live at Areyonga have next to nothing and yet were so appreciative of any experience or time which we provided for them. Throughout the play-dough experience the children were very well behaved, well mannered, shared with each other and at no stage did I hear one of the children say they were bored with the experience. This made me stop and realise how children who live in the city with modern influences are sometimes so over indulged and are given too much, which can make them disrespectful and less appreciative. (Carina)

Recognising the value of other, working from the standpoint of learners and teachers, this project provides the first stimulus for the development of teacher agency and for some preservice teachers, creating new understanding of the learners for whom they are responsible (Cacciattolo, Cherednichenko, Dakich, Dalmau, Davies, Gudjonsdottir and Kelly, 2007). For all the participants in this project, the time in the community, supported by teacher educators with experience in these settings, enabled the development of a discursive environment for inquiry about the practice. It supports the shift from reflective thinking to professional and reflexive conversations with the teacher educators. The significant growth in the pre-service teachers' thinking is illustrated below as they develop as activist teaching professionals (Sachs 2003).

The impact on the overall experience was both personal and professional. It was observed that each pre-service teacher experienced a powerful impact on personal traits such as the ability to take risk, resilience in new environments and a developing awareness of the role of teacher.

I learnt a great deal about myself, not only as a teacher but as a person. I was unsure whether I would be able to cope with the situation the children are living in and be able to not make emotional connections with the children and be able to just step away. (Melissa)

I can rough it in the desert! I learnt that whilst I still consider myself to be a fairly confident person, in certain situations I need to 'get into it' more. (Kristin)

I think I showed myself that I can get along with people with whom I don't share common beliefs and values fairly well. Some of the people who I encountered had quite different views about the world and yet I was able to get along quite well on our travels. (Tim)

In the Australian context, Nicholls, Crowley and Watt (nd) argue that much of what has gone wrong with education of Aboriginal children is the flawed belief that Aboriginal children learn differently to mainstream children. They are explicitly against the notion of "Aboriginal Learning Styles", suggesting that Aboriginal children learn when their interests and experiences are central to the learning experience, as do most people. Preservice teachers explored these assumptions and

reflected on their engagement with the learning of young people in these remote communities. Through dialogue in the communities with colleagues these pre-service teachers were able to begin to construct their own professional knowledge and beliefs to inform future actions and continue to develop as teachers for whose essential focus is on learning for all students (Sachs 2003).

The evidence that the experience impacted on the pre-service teacher professionally emerged in their comments, as well as their changed practice and commitment to the way they planned to teach in the future.

The experience has also helped me realise that regardless of where children come from, there is an innate willingness to learn. If we present learning in a way that accommodates the learning styles of the individual students, taking into account their cultural background, then children will enjoy learning and be successful in their own rights. (Tim)

That is so important to build up trust and relationships with people... the elders, parents, children and their siblings. The communities seem to be based on relationships so much more than what I have experienced on prac. It is important that the people trust you to take care of and educate their children and there is a significant need for mutual respect in order for this to occur, beginning firstly with the teacher respecting the Indigenous people and their culture and taking the time to learn about any cultural differences which may affect teaching practices. Most importantly, I came to love these children; they were so loving, friendly and open and much more resilient and autonomous than many of the children I have come into contact with. The experience helped me to become more open-minded about the children and their home situations, which I will take within my future teaching. (Emma)

I hope this helps me to be more understanding of students from different language and cultural backgrounds. I think it will make me more conscious of matching the classroom content to the interests and experiences of the students I am working with. I can see the dangers of presenting a curriculum which the students find irrelevant. I have seen the importance of matching the content to the intended outcomes. (Amanda)

Finally, some of the pre-service teachers experienced a lifting of their personal consciousness and a realisation and confrontation of their own held beliefs. The following reflection demonstrates that while some beliefs about children and learning were confirmed through this experience other more deep seated beliefs were challenged and faced in a way that helped the pre-service teacher to experience a shift in thinking about long held views of Indigenous people.

That even though I did not acknowledge this to myself prior to the experience, I actually did have quite a stereotypical view of Indigenous Australians! This view was based on my experiences of living in my country town with the Indigenous people which live there. I have had a few negative experiences and of course the media influences people's opinions. I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to see a different area of Australia and to see a remote community, as I now also have a view of Indigenous people living in a different environment away from many of the problems which have been introduced to them over the years. This

has allowed me to reflect on why I had these prior views and the importance of reserving judgement and considering why people may act the way that they do.
(Emma)

This project tested and affirmed Eisner's assumption about learners, that is: 'what students do with what they learn, when they can do what they want to do' (Eisner 2001, p.371). It also provided space for the detailed reflection on practice and the development of agency through discursive, critical inquiry and reflexive professional action (Giddens 1984).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While this experience was just a short taste of life in a remote Indigenous community, however from both the oral and written stories of the participants the trip gave them a more realistic idea of what it is like to live in a remote community. It has shown that involving pre-service teachers in experiences of community outside their cultural understanding does impact of their view of the world, how other cultures learn and live and this has the power to change their future teaching. By providing them with an experience about a culture they had little knowledge of, they did change their life view of that culture. Therefore, while it is essential that sound preparation and follow-up is part of the experience, it can be concluded that pre-service teachers who have had this experiences are able to make a more informed decision about whether working in a remote community is suitable for them. It is important for teacher education courses to find a way of providing pre-service teachers with a variety of challenging experiences, which will give them the opportunity to work collaboratively with others in authentic settings (Hargreaves 1994). These experiences provide a way to develop professional skills that cannot be done in the university tutorial.

The provision of practical experiences in communities that may be different to the life experiences of pre-service teachers needs to be further investigated to determine if a short but intense experience will impact on the way in which these pre-service teachers will interact with a community during their first years of teaching. Finally there will be value in continuing to follow these pre-service teachers into their early career to develop in depth case studies to determine if this lived experience has impacted on their decisions for teaching. This will include whether, pre-service teachers who have had a rural or remote pre-service experience will choose to spend time, during their career, in a rural and remote location. This project informed the development of a new partnership between Edith Cowan University and the Western Australian, Department of Education and Training which will see another group of preservice teachers, better supported with extensive cultural education, sponsorship and scholarship for extended placements in rural communities in Western Australia in 2009. A full research program will underpin and document the effectiveness, outcomes and sustainability of this project.

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