

Giving All/Reaping Rewards: An account of a new graduate teaching in remote Indigenous community schools

Christine Trimmingham Jack, University of Canberra
Heather Hitchon, Kulkarriya Community School

A number of remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory run their own independent schools. The communities are faced with a constant battle to recruit quality teachers to their schools and to attain a high level of literacy in their students. The 1996 National School English Survey reported that less than 20% of Year 3 Indigenous students met the reading standards with similar findings for Year 5 (Department of Education Science and Training, 1997). There is strong evidence that student achievement is significantly linked to committed and well-qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The Commonwealth Government National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) Report 2000 stated that recruiting 'good teachers' who are culturally aware and who can implement 'best teaching methods' are key elements in raising the literacy standard of Indigenous students (Department of Education Science and Training, 2000).

Excellent teachers are in demand and teachers tend to choose urban schools and the amenities they offer rather than remote schools (Department of Education Science and Training, 2000). The problem is exacerbated by the high attrition rate of early career teachers with up to 50% choosing to leave the profession in the first three to five years of service (Manuel, 2003: 140). There is a need for research on why good teachers stay (Manuel, 2003: 141) even more so in contexts which are often seen as challenging settings such as remote schools with Indigenous students.

The NIELNS has resulted in the implementation of a number of projects designed to raise the literacy levels of Indigenous students. This paper is a narrative account offering insight into the inner life, experiences and decision-making processes of a targeted new graduate (co-author Heather Hitchon) working in remote Indigenous community schools in Western Australia where one such project, the Scaffolding Literacy Program, is being used. It is a collaborative paper between the two authors, Heather and Christine who first met when Christine supervised Heather while she was completing her final professional experience subject (Teaching Internship) at the University of Canberra. The account indicates the delicate balance between an early career teacher in a remote setting wanting to rise to the challenge of teaching in a difficult setting and the ongoing tension between leaving and staying. It also illustrates the importance of a range of ongoing support as well as engagement in an effective teaching program to ensure successful teaching experiences in the early period of his or her teaching career.

Scaffolding Literacy Program

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication and otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAE to ACER. For more information contact CAL on (02) 9394-7600 or info@copyright.com.au
Education in Rural Australia, Vol. 14 (1) ...32

The Scaffolding Literacy Program was developed by Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey to meet the literacy needs of Indigenous students. It is currently being implemented in sites across Australia (Gray, Cowey & Axford 2003a; Gray, Cowey & Axford 2003b). It commenced implementation in schools that belong to the Association of Independent Community Schools (AICS) in Western Australia in 2000. The program employs an innovative and intensive approach to literacy teaching designed to achieve rapid and high level development in students who currently find it impossible to access the academic/literate discourse that drives the educational process in mainstream schooling. The approach is based on a recognition that 'the real language challenges Indigenous students face ... have to do with negotiating the learning production, and interrogation of academic/literate texts' (Gray & Cowey, 2002: 4). The teaching approach that addresses this challenge involves a systematic teaching sequence with discourse access as a pedagogic goal (Gray, 2002: 4). It is based on Vygotsky's theory of the 'zone of proximal development' providing a structure for students to achieve at levels previously considered too high for them (Bell, 2002: 46).

The 2003 Evaluation of the NIELNS indicates that the Scaffolding Literacy Program is leading to improved outcomes. Direct benefits include that students are:

- More willing to attempt reading unseen text and spelling new words;
- Writing longer stories;
- Showing a better understanding of what they are reading and being able to discuss the meaning of the texts in greater detail and depth;
- Showing the use of more ideas and greater elaboration in their writing;
- Spelling more accurately;
- Keen to re-read stories they have practised or written and enjoying themes more appropriate to their ages; and
- Displaying pride in their achievements.

(Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003).

While the Scaffolding Literacy Program requires significant commitment in training and implementation the feedback from teaching staff has been extremely positive. For example, the Principal of the Kadjuna (Wulungarra) Aboriginal Independent Community School commented that it was the best she had been involved in for 15 years of teaching and that progress was evident as the children were more actively engaged, understood themselves better and had a heightened sense of 'striving for success' (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003).

Teachers for remote schools

The close relationship between the University of Canberra staff involved in the Scaffolding Literacy Program and the remote schools it serves has provided opportunity for a two-way partnership that assists the needs of both partners. University staff who run the Scaffolding Literacy Program spend considerable time travelling to the remote schools and soon recognised the difficulty these schools were having in attracting quality staff or at times any staff at all! The success of the Program is dependent on recruiting teachers who are willing to undertake the training necessary for its

implementation and who show an ability for persistence in teaching children who often have a history of school failure. In 2002, Brian Gray invited a final year student who had finished Teaching Internship to take a six month teaching contract in a remote school that was having trouble in recruiting staff. The student was able to complete her final university subjects by distance. The initiative was successful with the school staff impressed by her ability to teach so successfully in a new setting.

Students, such as Heather, undertaking a degree in primary education at the University of Canberra complete an eight-week Teaching Internship Program in the first semester of their final year. It is designed to transition them into full-time teaching including taking duty-of-care for a class as well as becoming an involved member of the school community. The Internship runs for eight weeks and involves two stages. Stage One begins with observation of the school allowing Interns to get to know the school and to find contexts outside their classroom where they can be a contributing member. Within the classroom, they slowly take on longer periods of teaching under the supervision of their mentoring teacher, culminating in full time teaching at the end of the first four weeks. At this stage, an Interim Report if passed, allows the Intern to proceed to Stage Two consisting of team teaching with the mentoring teacher in the first week, full duty-of-care in weeks two and three and a week of relief teaching across the school in the final week. Those who successfully complete the Teaching Internship Program are able to undertake paid relief work in ACT government schools in the second half of the year while they are completing their final university subjects.

In 2001, Christine became convenor of Teaching Internship and was asked by staff involved in the Scaffolding Literacy Program to recommend some Interns who could assist the remote schools in a similar way. She responded by approaching students considered by the University Liaison Staff and staff in the schools where they completed Teaching Internship to be outstanding teachers. Heather was one of the first Interns to take up this invitation. Seventeen final year students and new graduates from the University have undertaken teaching contracts in the remote schools in the Northern Territory and Western Australia since 2000. These contracts range from six months to one year. The short-term contracts have been to supply remote schools with teachers when none were to be found. For example, three Interns took a six-month contract at Kulkarriya School when there was an almost complete turnover of staff after Term 1 in 2002. Eight have taken year-long contracts and three have stayed longer in other remote community schools. All but one teacher has been primary trained even though some have been required to teach a secondary class. The decision to use primary teachers is due to the focus on teaching literacy, in which all primary teachers are trained, and the need for a single teacher to teach the small secondary classes. Students who are in their final university semester complete their subjects by flexible delivery. All have reported that the experience has widened their perspectives about Aboriginal communities, taught them new strategies in teaching literacy and in classroom management that they will take into mainstream classes. In addition, they have enjoyed their time in

the schools. Some have come back to the university to talk to other students about their experiences and to encourage them to take up the opportunity.

There are advantages for the various stakeholders in this venture. First, university staff target interns and graduates who are considered to be high achieving teachers and who could do well in a remote setting and are willing to train in the scaffolding process. All those approached have expressed a desire to take up the opportunity, although some find that leaving a partner precludes them from doing so. Second, they receive support from the University team that provides on-site professional development in scaffolding, including detailed teaching notes as well as being supported by experienced school staff. These two forms of support give them a better chance of successful teaching in what is often considered to be a challenging context. Key factors in achieving successful outcomes for Indigenous students in remote schools, outlined in the Final NIELNS Report, include teachers being supported and being offered professional development (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003). Interns and graduates from the University have only been sent to schools in which Scaffolding Literacy is being practised. This has been intentional as it is important that new career teachers experience early success rather than the trauma of failure that might lead them to leave the profession. Indeed, it is hypothesised in the Final NIELNS Report that getting good teachers may be partly a consequence of the successes of initiatives such as the Scaffolding Literacy Program (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003). It may be that with the success of programs such as the Scaffolding Literacy Program more teachers are willing to go where they have a good chance of being effective in their teaching. Finally, the partnership between the University and the remote schools assists the Indigenous communities in the difficult task of recruiting teachers as well as providing the ACT teaching system with new graduates who have broadened their teaching experiences with the skills and perspectives that entails. However, getting good teachers remains a challenge for remote schools (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003).

This paper arose from a visit Christine took to the remote community schools in 2003 in order to see the Scaffolding Literacy Program first hand and, in particular, to spend some time with Heather in her classroom. On the way, Christine stopped at one school to discover the principal struggling with the fact that the new teacher had left the school almost immediately on arrival and she was now faced with finding someone to teach a teacher-less class. Christine spent the afternoon on the phone and finally found a relief teacher and a teacher willing to commit to at least a year in the school (both had just completed Teaching Internship). Such interventions are not ideal but they do indicate the benefits of a partnership between these schools and a university. They also indicate the continuing struggle principals must engage in to find staff for their schools.

Heather's Story: early days

Heather initially took a six months teaching contract in the Kimberley in the last semester of her fourth year in a Bachelor of Education (Primary) and stayed on. Christine had supervised her while she was on Teaching Internship and she approached Heather when she completed internship, asking her if she wanted to work in a remote school for six months. Indeed, when Christine phoned her at home to make put the proposition to her, Heather had been on the Web looking at employment possibilities in Western Australia. She wanted to do something adventurous before working in a mainstream school. While possible recruits are targeted at the University they still must apply to the school and undergo an interview by distance with the principal and members of the School Council made up from the local community. Heather took up Christine's initial offer, applied to the school going through the interview process and won the six-month position and stayed on for the next year. She has now worked in two remote schools since 2001 and, in 2003, Christine visited her in Kulkarriya Community School where Heather was the Scaffolding Literacy Specialist. Christine spent ten days observing teaching in the school, including Heather's classroom, and discussing her experiences with her. This joint paper is an outcome of these discussions. In writing it we have also drawn on Heather's person diary and some reflections she sent to Christine as part of an assessment task for a university subject she completed by distance.

Heather's first school was Yakanarra Community School. Heather remembers her early days when she arrived by small plane at Fitzroy Crossing on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. She had no previous experience of the outback, although talking to some of the University staff led to her understand that it was 'very remote and sparse country but beautiful'. Her first encounter confirmed what she expected: 'Finally arrived. All that excitement and anticipation has at last turned into reality and I am not disappointed. It is very much what I expected and I am not fazed greatly' (Hitchon, 2001-2003). Yet her initial contact with the children brought a degree of cultural shock: 'The children seem to do as they please and are rather bossy towards the adults. I was a little shocked that the children are still breast fed at two to three years of age' (Hitchon, 2001-2003). Another thing that surprised her was when they were given a slab of devon which they 'ripped into', breaking off handfuls to share with each other. The smell of the meat combined with the new classroom smells grounded this in her mind as a 'unique' place. What else hit her as unique on the eighty kilometre drive from Fitzroy Crossing to Yakanarra through the red dirt and sand was the St Georges Ranges: 'So magical. So red and uniquely shaped.'

Yakanara School consists of a long rectangular building containing three classrooms, a resource room and small library surrounded by a verandah and cool shady trees including mangoes and frangipanis. Heather was struck by the dedication of the principal and another teacher who had been at the school since it started under a bough shed in 1990: 'This is wholly and solely their life. The teaching part ... is what [they] revolve around. That's not me yet!' (Hitchon, 2001-2003). When Heather met her junior primary class (6 to 9 year olds) of five children, she was taken with the affection they showed towards her. Her initial reflections on the children was summarised by: 'They are moulded greatly into the norms of whitefella culture in the classroom, tease each other a lot, they do have an understanding of respect and do apologise to each other when they make snide remarks such as "You dumb!" The three boys are terrible together.' She was also fascinated that a nine-year old had hardly been to school. She recognized that health was an important factor, especially trachoma that is endemic in the region. The kids often said to her, "I'm weak" (Kriol for tired). She was confused as to whether they were really tired or just bored.

Her diary includes a statement that illustrates her attention to individual children. 'Interesting child,' was her first thought about an eight-year old girl. 'Very mature, can handle a variety of activities with confidence and skill—cooking. Very good at organizing and cleaning, building cages [to make the chook cages as part of a class project], hands-on, always thinking about shape, attaching and does it herself.'

Pre-service teachers are not targeted for going to the Kimberley until after Teaching Internship, which meant when Heather went, they only received an introduction to the Scaffolding Literacy Program before they went out. The approach is now being integrated into language subjects. Learning more about the approach is a hands-on activity with the support of experienced teachers and the University team. Heather found this a challenge. The program is based on working extensively with one text. She had prepared herself for teaching from one storybook, as the basis of her first attempt at Scaffolding Literacy, but when she arrived there she discovered she would be working from a different text. 'A thorough knowledge of the text and of the scaffolding process is essential' was an early entry in her diary (Hitchon, 2001-2003). She struggled to engage the children and to keep them on task. One difficulty was the presence of a six-year old who was not as well prepared for school as the other children. When she had a successful day, she considered herself 'the best teacher in the world' and on difficult days she was 'the worst teacher in the world' (Hitchon, 2001). Her reflection illustrates the transition from initial enthusiasm and energy to the reality of day-to-day school life reported in research on early career teachers (Manuel, 2003: 144).

Learning the actual process of scaffolding was a matter of trial and error as she sought to identify what worked with the children. She kept in touch with Wendy Cowey in Canberra, one of the leaders in the project, asking her questions by email and phone as well as sending her teaching videos for feedback. Heather's first email to Wendy included the following questions: 'How much of the text do we actually use for transformations? When should we begin easy spelling? Am I ultimately leading these children towards scaffolding writing other than spelling? When do we do this? What will tell me the students are ready?' (Email 6 August, 2001). Wendy sent a detailed response including the following advice:

What you are trying to do with a class group like yours is build routines around the text you are doing. One of the things you are doing through these routines is trying to build common knowledge between yourself and the children about the story you are working on. This means initially that you will tell the children what you want them to know. You will tell them in several ways. First, through Low Order Book Orientation when you talk about the picture, you will be explaining to them how to look at the illustration in a way that engages them with what the characters are doing and what their motivations, thoughts and feelings are. Through the Low Order Book Orientation you can also explain language and concepts that the children will be unfamiliar with . . . When you ask questions accept their answers and reconceptualise them. This is the second opportunity to build common knowledge. When the children tell you something, reword their answer if necessary and add some more information. Eg. If you said, Can anyone remember what the Bear was doing on this winter's day? A child might reply "walk". Then you could reply, "Well done, Bear was going for a walk. We can see his footprints in the snow so he must have been coming from over there in the trees." Also, allow more than one child to answer each question so that a climate where discussion and contributions are made is encouraged (Cowey, 2001).

Wendy then advised Heather to read the story to the children, letting them join in if they wished, although not slowing down the reading pace. They were then to be moved on to High Order Book Orientation where they could talk carefully about the author's choice of language. Transformations follow and involved chunking meaningful pieces of text and discussing why the author made particular language choices in this part of the text. This process is at the heart of scaffolding—letting children into the secrets of why writers make certain choices and how they strategically place information to build the story. The outcome is that the students access white cultural discourses. Word recognition and spelling flow on from this stage.

Wendy's email offered not only detailed information about scaffolding but also support to Heather as the most valuable resource and the central need to form pleasurable relationships with the children.

Don't panic. Just be methodical and do it every day as much as possible. Get to know the kids and do what you can. Remember, you are extremely precious to us and we won't expect you to perform miracles. Just get to know the kids and enjoy them and we

will support you however we can. I know the teaching sounds complicated and there are lots of layers to it but when you get the hang of it it's much easier than it seems. (Cowey, 2001).

On 12 November, Heather sent an email to Wendy entitled: 'We are making progress!' She was now onto the book she had originally expected to teach and the children were 'flying ahead'. 'My skills and understanding of scaffolding are beginning to develop a lot more. Each new text seems to get a little easier to unfold and deliver. I am feeling more and more confident with it. The teaching notes are still used extensively though!' Wendy also gave Heather feedback about a video of her teaching including thoughts for improving specific aspects. A comment on Heather's management reflects a significant factor in teaching in this setting: 'Overall, I think you are doing a great job. You don't get hassled or cross and all the interactions you have with the kids are positive.' Heather had quickly discovered that a calm and positive approach was essential if she was to engage the students and to keep them coming to school.

Second Term

Second term marked a breakthrough. In her first term, Heather had shared the classroom with an experienced teacher. Although the teacher's feedback and support was helpful, Heather welcomed having the classroom to herself, being able to program separately and deal with issues in her own way. As she became more skilful in the scaffolding process, the children became more engaged. She also learnt the importance of having meaningful rewards. For example, if they got their books out, sat back down again, completed their work, desisted from joining in a teasing match between other children, and helped to clean up without fooling around, one of five squares for each child was coloured in. The reward at the end of the day was a ride on the school's four-wheel motorbike specifically purchased for this purpose.

She also enjoyed the times when community members took the children and teachers away from the school on bush trips. They showed the teachers and children how to search for bush tucker, teaching them the Walmajarri language and telling them Dreamtime stories. The adults talked about their lives when they were growing up which in turn gave Heather a greater understanding of and empathy for what they had been through and their aspirations for the community and the children. She also learnt that children who were not as strong in the classroom were very confident whilst out on bush trips—they became the teachers. They would tell her stories about special places, teach her Walmajarri words and show her how to get through the bush without getting lost.

By the end of the year, Heather was feeling effective as a teacher and evaluations of the children's literacy and maths performance supported her feeling. Success and a desire to learn more from the community as well as a belief that she had more to give led Heather to turn down offers of permanency in NSW and ACT schools and to continue at the school in 2002.

A new year

When Heather returned after spending eight weeks with family and friends during the Christmas holidays, she found herself unsettled and unsure of her decision. However, this year she was team teaching with a different teacher who was also a new graduate and this made a difference. They quickly formed a positive working relationship and friendship. There were also two of her university peers working at another community school in the area. They kept in contact by phone and at Easter went to Broome together. Heather really enjoyed the company of people her age who were facing the same challenges: being away from home, making friends and being in a situation where it was hard to teach. She then decided that she could stay until the end of the year but 'that was it, then she was going!' Other factors that contributed to her coping were professional development days and long courses where she met new people and had social interactions beyond those with the limited number of teachers with which she worked. She had also met a man she liked which caused difficulties at first as she had just begun to enjoy having other single friends. He was persistent and they formed a partnership. Now, with the four hours distance between them and, as they both worked hard, a difficulty was finding time to travel to see each other.

In the second year, Heather was teaching the same children as the year before, with some additions, so she knew how to program for them and how to manage them. She became more confident and creative in planning enjoyable and new experiences for the children. For example, she and the children created a vegetable garden using skills in measurement (reading seed packets for height and distance, planning the garden on paper, measuring it and digging it out), explored related health issues, caring for plants and what they need from the environment, etc. Scaffolding became easier and the children were reading and writing more confidently and independently. Some of the children did not know their numbers when she first started teaching them but by the end of the second year they could add up in double digits. An added duty she was given was to teach sex education to secondary girls for half an hour each day. This was new for her, so she had to spend a good deal of time researching for the lessons. Later in the year, she was also given responsibility for teaching half an hour maths to the younger children in another class. This was onerous because she not only had to plan for the maths but

also for the lesson given during that time for her own class. The work mounted and by the end of the year she was ready for a change.

Kulkarriya School

Initially, Heather had planned to leave the Kimberley at the end of 2002 but she was interested in working in another community and seeing how they operated, so when a job came up at Kulkarriya Community School as a Scaffolding Literacy Specialist Teacher across all grades including secondary, she applied and won the position. It was difficult to leave her first school because the rewards she got from the children's learning were so high and because she was close to the community and felt as though she was letting them down by leaving. On reflection, she could not believe how much she had learnt in one year, but it had been stressful and all consuming.

Noonkanbah Station is home to the Yungngora Community. It is situated 360 kilometres east of Broome in Western Australia and is on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. The Community has taken a significant leadership role in the fight for land-rights. The Nyikina, Walmajarri and others originally worked the station when it was under white ownership. In 1969 they walked off the property, due to poor working conditions, and began a protracted battle for ownership of their land. Their land-rights claim in 1972 was the first in Australia. In 1976 they return as the owners of the site after 90 years of dispossession. One of their first acts was to make the community a 'dry' (drug and alcohol free) community and to establish a community-run school. They employed two teachers and conducted the school under the control of a school board consisting of local community members.

The original vision of the Community was to 'bring young people back to the Law, making sure they married the right way, making sure they spoke Walmajarri before they spoke English, caring for the land, conducting ceremonies' (Hawke & Gallagher, 1989: 85). Their priority was cultural and social rather than economic. The Community had watched the negative effect of their children being schooled away from them in Fitzroy Crossing with the loss of social and cultural ties that entailed.

The Yungngora community, as it is now called, have a different vision for their children in the twenty-first century. Dickey Cox, community chairperson says he 'wants these kids to learn more reading and more writing so they can carry on. If they learn more then they can run the community. We started with the cultural stuff but now people are marrying others from different skins and that's alright. People used to get punished for these things by the old people'. Owen Button, a community member, expressed a similar view: 'The world is changing and going forward. Aboriginal people are changing

with the world. People are now marrying people who they like and feel comfortable with' (Community Consultation, 2003).¹

The community want the children to be well educated so they can eventually take leadership roles in the community as teachers, administrators, mechanics, doctors, health care workers, nurses and translators across the languages used within the community. Yet, preparing for these jobs means leaving the community and the danger is that they don't come back. A member of the School Board, stated: 'You want them to go, yet you want them to stay.' The community also want the children to enjoy their learning, to have achievable goals for themselves and for teachers to work with the individuality of children with their own likes and dislikes.

Kulkarriya School has four classes including a secondary and a preschool class. There are eighty students in the school. Moving to Kulkarriya School was good for Heather because she met new people, there were more teachers including some who had taught in urban settings, she was closer to her partner and her experiences in relating to the community in her previous job made it easier in the new school. She was also interested in seeing the differences between the communities. Yet there were still challenges. She struggled with the scaffolding story books that were selected for her, had not taught literacy to secondary students before and missed teaching other subjects. Still, she felt valued and needed because the other teachers were new to scaffolding and to teaching in a remote setting so they relied on her for support. There were also new opportunities like going to Perth for a scaffolding literacy coordinators' workshop, being involved in preparing students for the Croc Festival (an Indigenous art and cultural happening where students perform and participate in workshops) and being the LOTE (Kriol, Walmajarri and Nyikina) coordinator.

Giving all/reaping rewards

While visiting the school, Christine conducted a workshop in which the teachers reflected on the metaphors they use to guide their teaching there. Metaphors have long been recognised as devices that facilitate understanding. They reframe conceptualisation of new areas of investigation by bringing together previously unlinked concepts. Generally, metaphors may be categorised as either generative or constricting. Generative metaphors expand interpretive possibilities in the field of study and facilitate innovations in thinking. Constricting metaphors limit interpretive possibilities and restrict innovation (Schwartzman, 1997:22).

Employment of metaphor is a part of everyday life. It is central in shaping how we think about the world (our conceptual system). Metaphor may be defined as 'understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 5). In particular, metaphors:

- form coherent systems in terms of which we conceptualise experience;
- are partially culturally determined and partially tied to individual experience, therefore, different people may understand the same metaphor differently;
- structure thoughts, attitudes and actions;
- highlight certain aspects of an experience while suppressing others, hence, they may be constraining as well as generative ;
- provide a link between new knowledge and old, especially between image and language;
- may provide new insight into reality and support new ways of orientating oneself in the world;

Two important conclusions which may be drawn here are first, that by examining the metaphors employed by a person in a particular situation, insight may be gained into how a person structures, understands and acts within that situation. This process also holds the potential of exposing ways in which metaphors limit and diminish practice. Second, that the development of new metaphors facilitate new ways of orientating oneself and acting in the world.

Heather identified her metaphor as 'giving all/reaping rewards'. She chose this metaphor because she believes that she has to be extremely committed to her teaching and to give it her best effort if she is to be successful with the students. She is clear about the close association between lesson preparation and successful teaching and has spent long hours engaged in designing lessons. In particular, the Scaffolding Literacy Program requires detailed knowledge of the text being used and associated preparation for teaching sequences. She also tries to cater for individual growth and development and concentrates intently in the teaching process so that she takes up every opportunity offered to teach the students. Yet there are rewards that come from giving all. She has found that hard work pays off and she relishes seeing the students understand and achieve successful learning. Holidays are an immediate reward but she also looks forward to advancing her career and she hope that what she has learnt in this setting will assist that in the future.

Underneath her metaphor, Heather wrote the following statement: 'Always giving and learning to take time for self.' Heather is an extremely conscientious, hard working and successful generalist and scaffolding teacher. Her selection as a literacy specialist eighteen months after she first went to the Kimberley demonstrates the high regard in which she is held. When she first arrived, she had noted that teaching dominated the lives of two teachers she met and she wrote in her diary that this commitment was 'not her yet!' Yet a year later she was close to joining their ranks.

Teachers, like Heather, choose to work in small community schools because they want the adventurous experience of working in a remote context and because they want to participate in the successful education of Aboriginal children. Josh Bell, principal of the school, commented that at Kulkarriya there is a 'feeling of hominess and acceptance from the people. A feeling that you really mean something to the people, that you are important and they really care for you.' He also feels safe because it is a 'dry' community and he enjoys the tremendous support he gets from the chair of the School Board and the community in general. Josh wants to empower the people so eventually they have the skills to run the school and community services. He, too, is learning new skills such as coping with power failures and the water going off, running a school with almost no support staff and learning do-it-yourself maintenance (Bell, 2003).

The close contact they have with the community means that the teachers develop empathy for their goals and so Josh and Heather have an additional motivation to work hard for the people they have come to know so well. A danger here is circulation of the 'redemptive narrative': a desire to save underprivileged children (Meiners, 2002: 89). However, the central tenet of the Scaffolding Literacy Program – access to the academic/literate discourse of white culture – as well as the involvement of community members in teaching community languages, disrupts the redemptive narrative. Teachers such as Heather and Josh are clear that the community intends to employ Indigenous teachers as soon as possible.

Other tangible rewards are also important for those attracted to teaching in these settings. The school is near the river and fishing is much enjoyed at the weekend. The teachers also get two weeks extra holidays and pay a token rent for accommodation. They are paid above the independent award as are government teachers working in remote settings, although teachers in the community schools have to do extra duties to receive this payment such as cleaning their classrooms and other parts of the school and taking on additional coordination roles. Teachers in government schools also received three months long service after three years and six months after four years while those in remote schools only receive long service after six years. They also have less access to specialist and resource teachers.

The teachers live next to the school alongside other teachers. The remoteness means they are not able to follow the daily recreation pursuits they might in a city or town including having a drink (alcoholic) together. Walking together at the end of the day is a common form of relaxation, although school issues are often discussed. Josh, his wife Madeleine who teaches preschool there and Heather identified that teachers working in small remote community schools need to have a great deal of respect for others' personalities, as well as tolerance and patience. Often, they stated, they need to

'hold back' their thoughts and opinions as the tensions that may arise from stating them and 'rocking the boat' is too great a risk. The consequences of doing so is magnified as there are less people and things to help people cope and recover: there are no 'outsiders' with whom they can debrief, no gym or pool where they can work out their tensions and no sense of leaving it all behind at the weekend.

Staff at the university have learnt that in recruiting teachers for these schools it is best to send a single student who feels comfortable in going into a new setting on his/her own or to send two people who are either a couple or who have already established a solid friendship. Sending groups who have little knowledge of each other and little experience in managing conflict is less successful. Teachers in a remote setting need to be content with their own company. Although they live next to each other, there is a need to provide some physical and emotional distance at the end of each day. At times, avoidance can be healthy. Visitors are always viewed as exciting and greatly welcomed but the heavy demands of the job means that at times visitors become more work!

The physical closeness of the school means that it is tempting to spend most of the day and some of the evening there which makes it a long day when teachers are required to be at school at 6.45am (The children attend school from 7am to 12.30pm). In the first eighteen months, Heather arrived at school at 6am and stayed until 4.30 with only half an hour break and she often worked at home after dinner. She also worked most of the weekend. Being a new graduate and setting high expectations for herself, coupled with the demands of the job, resulted in spending most of her time planning in order to ensure the students' success. Two years later, she identified that planning and ensuring the children's success continued to be her priority but it had become less demanding due to the change in jobs and as she was now more experienced. She looks forward to the holidays as her immediate reward and to the long-term reward of professional gains that may come from successful teaching in a challenging setting. Now she begins school at 6.45am, takes two half hour breaks through the day, goes home for lunch for an hour and returns to work until 4.30. She rarely works in the evening and only a few hours at the weekend, although she continues to take on extra duties. Yet, there remains a tension for her about the amount of time and effort she puts into her teaching and the need to take time for relaxation.

The Scaffolding Literacy Program began in Kulkarriya Community School in 2001 as part of a DEST-funded initiative. A year later the majority of students had moved from being assessed as non-readers to the majority engaging and making strong progress in reading development (Bell, 2002: 46). Kulkarriya School won a National Excellence Award for Scaffolding in 2003 (they also won a state achievement award in 2002). Winning has been exciting for Heather. She, along with the principal, chair of the School Council and two students were flown to Sydney and Perth for award ceremonies.

She sees that there are good things happening at the school, including a new maths playground and ant-bed basketball court, the Croc Festival and new primary school buildings in 2004, including a gym. She enjoys the support of the principal and has decided to remain for another year but not as the literacy specialist, as she misses the variety that comes with being a generalist teacher. She applied for teaching the lower primary grades and the community quickly offered her the job.

Heather came to the Kimberley because she anted to be adventurous. She has decided to leave at the end of the year (2004). She is keen to travel overseas and is thinking of doing some volunteer teaching in Africa with another University of Canberra graduate who also spent a year teaching in a remote school. When she reflects back over her time in the Kimberley her reasons for staying are numerous and reported in the next section.

Reasons for staying

In reflecting on my time here in the Kimberley, there are a few things that stand out to me as to why I love it so much, and it's not the fishing! I love the isolation from the 'real world', really being able to be me. I often sit and wonder the type of person I would have become if I had of taken up positions in the ACT or NSW, would it be different?? Indeed I think it would. I feel as though teaching in this remote setting has enabled me to discover me. More so than if I was in a town or city. I love being able to wear casual clothes, no make-up and know that it's not going to affect my teaching ability and that students or families like it. They feel threatened by formality. I've realized that human beings are very caught up in material possessions. I realize how much I can actually live without and be very content with. Now, too many possessions make me feel cluttered. I enjoy the isolation because suddenly the small things, like wandering along a supermarket isle and having great choice in foods is exciting. Driving the 2-3 hours to the closest town, which is tiny, is a somewhat thrilling experience. Seeing lots of people as you wander down the street and feeling like you are smiling at them all as they gaze back at you with a polite acknowledgement that something good must have happened to this girl! And indeed it has. What most people see as life's everyday chores and mundane routine, I see as exciting and pleasurable. I look forward to doing things so much more and will travel great distances for a night to catch up with people and experience the real world, even if just for 24 hours.

I love having the chance to do things that I want to do, like my sewing. In the 'real world', I would never find the time to sit and sew for hours on end because there was always a party to go to, shopping to be done, movies to be watched. Sleeping in past 7am is a treat!

The people I've met who have been teaching up here for a long time are inspirational. The stories of hardship only twelve years ago make it seem all so easy for us really. We complain when the power goes out for a few hours, it's hard to imagine them living day-to-day, night to night without power. There isn't much that our schools go without, except equal conditions with state schools. I fear that if they have too much, there will be little appreciation

Ultimately, I enjoy my job. I enjoy the freedom in this setting to be able to design my own program and attempt to meet the needs of the particular group. I often begin by asking: what is going to help these children become more powerful in themselves and in their culture and mine? The one thing I strive for in my teaching is to give these students choice, to open up their worlds so that they can see beyond their front doorstep. If they can do that over their schooling life, I feel as though they will become more powerful to choose the path they lead, not one that they think they should follow or one where they know no different. In the small things, like when they have children, what job they choose, where they might choose to live, how they spend their money, places they may visit, the values and attitudes they adopt (Hitchon, 2004).

Conclusion

Although tempted by more lucrative conditions in the government schools, Heather has elected to remain a teacher in community schools. Teaching in these small schools can be lonely when there are few teachers of similar age and you are away from friends and family, yet there are rewards. Teachers develop close relationships with the community and learn about their culture and lives; they see the significant changes in the children's literacy levels as well as in other subjects; they take on responsibilities and leadership roles they might not be given in a mainstream school; and they experience the beauty of the remote country. There is less hierarchy in schools as teachers and principals form an equal partnership in making a success of the school and finding enjoyment in the remote setting. The remoteness also gives new forms to, and heightens the enjoyment of, events that may be taken for granted in the city life: swimming in the river, camping out under the stars, getting together with teachers from other schools, a day at the races, a weekend in town, a meal at a restaurant. There is a different rhythm to life marked by the hours in the school day, the dry and wet seasons, long drives to anywhere, the silence surrounding the school buildings and teachers' quarters into the afternoon and evening. Relationships with those at home are maintained by email and phone. Teachers are flown to the school and home once a year at the school's expense. However, flying home in

holidays is prohibitively expensive and driving can take at least a week. Most teachers who come to the schools take their holidays in the surrounding region.

There are also rewards for both the University and the schools in this two-way partnership. The graduates make a substantial contribution to the success of the Scaffolding Literacy Program and there is the added bonus and satisfaction of staff retaining close contact with the graduates, seeing them being successful in teaching in a challenging context and learning from them. Heather's experiences coupled with reflections from other students and graduates who have taught at the schools, indicate some important considerations in recruitment for teaching in remote settings. First, the importance of continued mentoring shared between the University and the school. All students who have gone to these settings comment about its value. Manuel (2003) in her research on retention and attrition of early career teachers also argues for substantial links between university preparation programs, employing bodies and schools so that new teachers are able to find support from 'a range and variety of sources according to their needs' (Manuel, 2003: 179). Additionally, the high turnover of staff means that a project such as the Scaffolding Literacy Program requires continued support as new teachers are inducted into the process. 'Old hands' like Heather become young leaders but still require feedback and support as they refine their skills. Second, that there is a higher degree of success if a single person or couple are selected. Principals of these schools have long recognised that recruiting couples is an advantage. However, initiatives from the University indicate that selecting either a new graduate who is keen for adventure (as was Heather) or new graduates sharing a solid friendship fare well in the context. Third, primary trained teachers such as Heather adapt well to teaching students for whom attaining a satisfactory level of literacy is a key concern. Fourth, there is a need to challenge the 'redemptive discourse' in prospective teachers and to offer an alternative arising from an 'effective teaching' discourse. Finally, new graduates require the emotional resilience to cope with ambivalence about the successfulness of their teaching and about their decision to work in this context. Heather oscillated between 'leaving at the end of the year' and 'just one more year' as well as moving between seeing herself as successful and not successful in her teaching. The capacity to tolerate ambivalence and to persist is critical for success.

While Heather has stayed for two years she is one of a small number of new graduates who have gone to these remote schools and who have decided to stay on for more than six months. The difference for Heather is that she had wanted to teach in such a setting well before graduation so that Christine's invitation only ensured an easier path to achieving her goal. Other final year students who have taken six-month contracts have been lured back by offers of permanency in their local state or territory. Indeed it seems that taking up the opportunity to teach in a remote setting makes them more attractive

to employers (all students who have taken these contracts have been offered permanency in ACT or NSW).

What seemed to hold Heather to the remote setting is the feedback that she is being successful, her enjoyment of the students and the community, and a sense that she doesn't want to give up the freedom of a small flexible school structure. Yet her decision to stay had a high degree of ambivalence which seems indicative of the challenge an early career teaching is likely to face when working in a remote setting. At the end of 2004, Heather and all the staff at Kulkarriya School are leaving. The principal and his partner have given six years to the school offering stability which is the basis for identifying needs, developing plans to satisfy them and bringing them to fruition. The introduction of an innovative literacy program has been central in ensuring effectiveness and in supporting teachers. The community will face a challenge they must be carefully negotiated if the gains made in the last six years are to be maintained. Heather's story and the situation currently facing Kulkarriya School signal the delicate balance these schools, the teachers who staff them and the community face in ensuring that the student's needs are adequately addressed.

Notes

¹ The research undertaken in this paper has been approved by the University of Canberra Ethics Committee. The paper was presented, by the School Principal, to the Kulkarriya School Board for approval by the Yungngora Community. The quotations inserted in this section were at the Community request.

References

Bell, J. Interview, 20 August 2003.

Bell, J. (2002) Scaffolding Literacy at Kulkarriya Community School, *Practically Primary*. 7, 2. June, pp. 46-48.

Cowey, B. (2001) Email, 6 August.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000) Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A review of state policy evidence, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8, 1, Jan. <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1>.

Department of Education, Science and Training (2003) *Final Report of the National Evaluation of National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS)*, http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/indigenous/publications/nielns/NIELNS_final_report.pdf

Department of Education Science and Training (2000) *The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, www.dest.gov.au/schools/indigenous/nielns.htm

Department of Education Science and Training (1997) *Mapping Literacy Achievement: Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey*, <http://www.dest.gov.au/mla/index.htm>.

Gray, B. Cowey, W. & Axford, B. (2003a) *University of Canberra Accelerated Literacy Program. Fourth Report to the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training*. University of Canberra.

Gray, B. Cowey, W. & Axford, B. (2003b) *Scaffolding Literacy with Indigenous Children in School. Final Report to the Indigenous Education Branch, DETYA*. University of Canberra.

Gray, B. & Cowey, W. (2002) *Key Elements of Scaffolding Literacy: Pedagogy and Teacher Support*. University of Canberra: Schools and Community Centre.

Hawke, S. & Gallagher, M. (1989) *Noonkanbah: Whose Land. Whose Law*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Press.

Hitchon, H. (2004) *Reflections on Reasons for Staying*.

Hitchon, H. (2001) *Education Research Colloquium Reflections*.

Hitchon, H. (2001-2003) *Personal Diary*.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Manuel, J. (2003) 'Such are the Ambitions of Youth': Exploring issues of retention and attrition of early career teachers in New South Wales, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 31, 2, 139-151.

Meiners, Erica, R. (2002) 'Disengaging from the Legacy of the Lady Bountiful in Teacher Education Classroom', *Gender and Education*, 14, 1, pp. 85-94.

Schwartzman, R. (1997). 'The Next Move in the Metaphoric Game'. *Education*, 118 (1), 22-24.