

Chapter 5

Going Remote: Narratives of Learning on an Indigenous Professional Experience Placement



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Abstract A lack of specialist knowledge and skills in teachers, as well as high levels of teacher turnover has contributed to the reported poor educational outcomes of Indigenous students in remote communities in Australia. In response to these reports, Australian universities have been required to include curriculum and pedagogical content that addresses two specifically focused Indigenous standards in their initial teacher education provisions. To enrich these standards, universities have offered placement opportunities in Indigenous communities for pre-service teachers. In this chapter, I report on a newly designed remote Indigenous placement through the presenting and analysing reflective narratives written by four pre-service teachers who participated in the placement. Many aspects of the stories are distinctive with respect to the individuals and their experiences, but commonalities emerge in the form of four over-arching strands of story: stories of equity and social justice; stories of building relationships and collaboration; stories of the ‘right’ pedagogy; and stories of Learning on Country.

It was a journey of continual learning, from the moment that I arrived, until the moment I got on the plane to leave. I have come away from my placement overwhelmed by the enormous volume of knowledge and a deep feeling of appreciation to the students, community members, teachers and teaching assistants who taught me so much.

(Teanau, Pre-service teacher)

Preamble

A recent education policy document published by the Australian Government argued that all university teaching graduates needed to ‘have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities’ (DEWR, 2011, p. 9). It further argued that universities in Australia should aim to

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produce teaching graduates ‘who have a comprehensive understanding of ... remote education grounded in practical experience and theoretical knowledge’ (DEEWR, 2011, p. 3). In the context of teaching placements and experience, this meant universities should structure their teaching degrees with ‘stronger capacity and credibility ... especially in terms of preparing teachers for work in rural, regional and remote Australia’ (Trinidad et al., 2011, p. 112). It is with this policy context in mind that we set about the task of re-designing and re-implementing a remote Indigenous placement in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. In this chapter, I share four narratives written by pre-service teachers relating to their experience and learning on this newly designed remote Indigenous placement. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2016) and the concept of storylines (Sondergaard, 2002) the narratives are analysed to identify the common stories that cut across the four narratives.

Stories of Support (or Lack of Support) for Remote Education in Australia

Schools in remote and very remote areas of Australia have been described as high needs schools which are presented with a number of challenges (Price, 2016). In these remote locations, students tend to fare worse than their urban peers in standardised tests of literacy and numeracy achievement. It is more difficult to attract and retain teachers in these locations, and those who do elect to teach there are often not adequately prepared to work in these schools. Student attendance is erratic, and they are very isolated places both geographically and culturally with limited access to services (Price, 2016). However, it should be noted that there are some who suggest these negative discourses around Indigenous outcomes that oftentimes originate from the reporting of data from national tests of literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) are unhelpful as they run counter to criteria that are considered ‘good schooling’ in these communities (Disbray, 2016).

The high turnover of teachers in remote locations has been reported as a significant factor in the educational outcomes for students in remote schools (Hall, 2013). In an evaluation of Northern Territory teachers that examined issues around teacher quality, experience and expertise there were three main areas highlighted in relation to those students considered ‘at risk’ in remote communities. These included high teacher turnover, lack of preparedness to teach Indigenous students, and a lack of specialist expertise in areas such as English as a Second Language (ESL) (Abu-Duhou, McKenna, & Howley, 2006).

In the past decade or so a number of initiatives from both education departments and universities have been put in place to try and address the issues with staffing and teacher preparation to work in remote and very remote schools. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership has recognised that quality teaching begins with quality Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and have therefore developed a suite of professional standards that ITE providers must ensure students meet upon

graduating. Two of these are specifically Indigenous focussed: Standard 1.4, 'Strategies for Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students'; and Standard 2.4, 'Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (AITSL, 2011). The introduction of these standards has required universities to include curriculum and pedagogical content that addresses these standards in their ITE provisions. Whilst many universities have integrated the standards across their courses, other universities have included dedicated units relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in their courses and specialisations within courses. For example, in 2008 the New South Wales Department of Education and four other universities piloted an enhanced teacher training program (ETTP) delivered to final year primary pre-service teachers, through a suite of dedicated units, that aimed to build pre-their capacity to teach Indigenous students (Labone, Cavanagh, & Long, 2014).

Similarly, education departments have been looking seriously at the area of teacher recruitment in remote and very remote locations. In 2010, the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (DET) launched their 'Quality Remote Teaching Service Program' as a means to recruit teachers for their 82 remote schools. The process which involved a number of stages aimed to assess applicants' suitability for working in these contexts. Assessment was based on research conducted by DET using personality profiling on 90 remote practitioners nominated by principals, to identify the dispositions and characteristics needed for success in remote communities (Brasche & Harrington, 2012).

In addition to the inclusion of curriculum relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education many universities are offering professional experience opportunities in remote schools. This has been an area of expansion with an increasing numbers of studies researching these kinds of professional experience initiatives. Given the issues around attracting and retaining teachers in these communities, programs which give pre-service teachers the opportunities to make informed decisions around working in these places would seem a necessary inclusion in ITE. However, planning for and enacting this work is not without its challenges (Osborne, 2003). In addition to logistical considerations such as placement planning and coordinating, financial expense, geographical isolation and challenges of finding suitable accommodation for pre-service teachers, there are also issues associated with how well prepared pre-service teachers are to teach and live in these places (Auld, Dyer, & Charles, 2016; Sharplin, 2002; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). Many studies talk about the importance of pre-service teachers being culturally competent, employing culturally relevant pedagogies, and linking new ideas about teaching to what is already known (e.g., Osborne, 2003). Warren and Quine (2013) state that teachers need to be both culturally and pedagogically prepared to 'deal with the multifaceted challenges that exist in remote communities' (p. 13). Sullivan and Johnson (2012) suggest the challenges of appropriate preparation, cultural awareness, and long-held beliefs systematically, 'should improve the quality of education that teachers provide to students in remote schools' (p. 107). Others argue that all of this learning should sit within a rights based framework which advocates for 'education for consciousness raising' (Falcon & Jacob, 2011, p. 26). This in turn

is important for the ongoing reconciliation agenda established some 25 years ago after the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

A report published in 2016 used a five dimensional framework to measure Australia's progress in this area and set out a road map for how we can become a 'reconciled, just and equitable Australia now and twenty-five years into the future'. The five dimensions relate to the development of:

- Positive relationships built on trust and respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians participating equally and equitably in all areas of life;
- All political, business and community institutions actively supporting all dimensions of reconciliation;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights being valued and recognised part of a shared national identity; and
- A widespread acceptance of our nation's history and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated. (Reconciliation Australia, 2016)

Remote practicums can provide a window into opportunities to teach in remote schools. In recent years, alternative placement opportunities such as International placements have become a popular addition to ITE (Fitzgerald, Parr, & Williams, 2017). These have been shown to have many positive benefits in terms of student learning including the development of intercultural competencies and improved classroom practice (Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009). However, there has been a paucity of research conducted into the potential benefits of remote placements in Australia for pre-service teachers, with most studies focusing on the logistics and complexities of doing this work (see for example, Auld et al., 2016; Osborne, 2003; Sharplin, 2002; Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadley, 2014; Yarrow et al., 1999).

The Back Story of This Remote Practicum

After securing a grant in 2015 from the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Federal Government), a team of teacher educators and professional staff in Monash's Faculty of Education began the work of setting up a remote professional experience in consultation with the Northern Territory Department of Education. The team included myself and a colleague who held the role of Director, Indigenous Education and Leadership in the Faculty at the time. Following the departure from the Faculty a previous coordinator some years earlier, we began the job of re-imagining and re-designing a remote Indigenous placement experience. After potential sites had been identified, we liaised with various schools and communities in relation to which schools might be prepared to host a group of up to 12 students. Two communities were identified as potential sites. After logistical issues had been considered in relation to timing and duration of the placement, we began the task of selecting students. Interested third and fourth year Bachelor of Education students, and second year Master of

Teaching students were invited to submit a written application that responded to three questions:

1. How would you benefit from the experience of participating in a remote Indigenous placement?
2. What does it mean to be a ‘culturally competent’ teacher?
3. What are the issues related to education in remote Indigenous contexts?

The applications were then shortlisted and a smaller group of students were interviewed. The written application, interview, academic results in the education unit EDF2031 ‘Indigenous perspectives on teaching and learning’, and previous professional experience reports were used as a means to select the final group of ten students who embarked on the placement in August, 2016. Our aim was to select students who we felt would be a best fit for the experience. This was important as schools in these communities are difficult places to work and are dealing with their own set of complex issues (Price, 2016). This process was repeated with a second cohort of six students who participated in the placement in August, 2017. An induction program was developed in consultation with the communities and schools that both groups of students needed to complete prior to participating in the placement. During this period, ethics approval was gained to conduct research to understand the various stakeholders’ experiences. As part of this research, we interviewed pre-service teachers, school principals, teachers and Indigenous support staff from schools in the remote locations. Pre-service teachers were interviewed both during and after the placement and school personnel after the placement. In 2017, additional ethics clearance was sought to give pre-service students the option of writing a reflective narrative about their learning whilst on the placement. In this chapter, I focus on four reflective narratives written by pre-service teachers who participated in the 2017 placement experience.

About the Storytelling in This Study

As stated earlier, the broader study from which this chapter draws involved interviewing all of the various stakeholders in relation to their experiences in the setting up and implementation of the placement. The data reported on here focuses on the reflective narratives written by four of the pre-service teachers who embarked on the 2017 placement. A small number of questions were provided to help the pre-service teachers think about how they might approach their writing, although they were encouraged to focus on things that were important to them. I wanted it to be their story. The following questions were provided as prompts:

- What were your motivations for undertaking the professional placement?
- How were your expectations met or otherwise?
- Were there some significant events that prompted you to think/reflect and learn?
- What did you learn about working and living in this space, about teaching and learning, and about yourself as a teacher?

Taking a narrative inquiry approach I wanted to gain a real sense of each pre-service teacher's individual lived experience of the remote placement through the written reflections. I wanted to understand what mattered to them. As such, a narrative inquiry approach was applied to the ways in which the reflective narratives were written. Clandinin (2016) describes narrative inquiry as an 'approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding' (p. 17).

Becoming a teacher is not confined to the four walls of the classroom. Teachers' lived experiences are constructed within the broader social, cultural and institutional contexts in which schools and classrooms are situated (Williams, 2015). This is of particular importance for schools in remote locations in Australia where teachers live in relative geographical and cultural isolation. The social, cultural and political issues are complex in these communities, where Indigenous peoples have been subject to decades of colonial practices in an attempt to assimilate them into dominant Australian values (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013). Consequently, the pre-service teachers' experiences of living and being in these communities and the learning that occurred outside of the classroom were considered equally important.

There were two main stages applied to the data analysis. First, each narrative was read separately, to gain a sense of the individual experience of each of the participants. The second stage involved applying the concept of storylines from feminist poststructuralism (see, for example, Davies, 2000; Sondergaard, 2002) to identify any common storyline/s that cut across the individual narratives. Sondergaard (2002) defines storylines as 'a condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one's own and other's practices and sequences of action' (p. 191).

Relating the Stories

In this section, I retell stories from four of the pre-service teachers—Cordelia, Ryan, Tanya and Teanau—who undertook a placement in the Northern Territory in 2011. As much as possible I have tried to retain the voice of each story-teller and keep their stories 'in tact'. This was especially crucial as I had asked them to write their narratives in a way that was important to them. And yet, I have not shied away from showing my own role in relating and interpreting each pre-service teacher's story. I had been invested in the planning and implementation of this placement for two years. I was confident that it had been a positive learning experience for the students involved, but in my prompts for them I had left it relatively open in terms of what they might write about so there was a level of uncertainty in what I might find. In terms of my interpretive role, I wasn't sitting in front of them asking questions as they composed their narratives, and I did not have the benefit of facial cues or body language to help me interpret their stories. Nevertheless, an aim of narrative inquiry is not necessarily to find one 'truth' or answer to a question or set of questions but to recognise the fact that there are many different stories equally valid that should be told (Hunter, 2010).

Cordelia's Story

The first email with a reflective narrative attached arrived. I opened the document with a sense of both intrigue and trepidation.

Cordelia began her story by quoting her mentor teacher in Maningrida, in the Northern Territory, when she first met her. She had asked if there were any tips her mentor might give.

Pause.... [exhales]... Ahh, gosh... well, I know this sounds cliché, but... I think the best piece of advice I can give you is if you can come up with as few expectations as possible, you're going to fare a lot better. It's those who can adapt to any situation that really get something out of it.

She then proceeded to write about her beliefs around teaching. In particular, she expounded her belief that teaching should be totally focused on student learning, and that 'children possess unique and tremendous skill sets themselves, and as such, have a great deal of lessons to teach *adults*'. She said it was this that contributed to her motivations to undertake this placement. '[I wanted to] take a step back from constantly voicing certainty and authority in educational spaces. Instead, I sought to learn from and listen to other voices so that I could have a deeper understanding of the role of a teacher in community life'. She explained how she heeded her mentor's advice and that she entered the space with a deliberate promise to be 'open-minded', a 'blank slate' and to 'learn as much' as she could.

In the next part of the story Cordelia discussed some of her learning in her Maningrida placement. She talked about how she was amazed at the 'resilience' of the children she had taught, making reference to the many challenges for children including health, poverty, language barriers and educational attainment. There was a sense that she was troubled by all of this as she talked about discussing this with her mentor teacher. Cordelia concluded that 'Indigenous education is fraught with extenuating factors' and that it was important to 'examine the situation through a holistic lens'. Following this, she explained how on her placement she had tried to make sense of the impact of white colonialism on Indigenous education, another aspect of her story that obviously troubled her. She had actively sought out conversations with Indigenous elders and Indigenous assistants. They told her stories about how before white occupation many tribal groups had owned the land and that they have now managed to live in relative harmony through negotiating traditional land laws. Community elders had,

Worked tirelessly with the local school and police to ensure that their children had access to both worlds. The results of such respectful collaboration had resulted in many positive outcomes, such as a school cultural team who imparted cultural lessons to the children, camping trips on sacred land, Indigenous teaching assistants in classrooms, a local school bus to bring children to school and ongoing, concerted efforts to engage students and families in the school education system.

Cordelia concluded by saying that she felt working collaboratively was the only way forward.

Next, she recounted what she had learned about teaching. ‘Teaching Indigenous children’, she wrote, ‘requires you to pretty much abandon all previously tried-and-tested pedagogical methods and instead rely on the relationship you develop with the individual child for guidance’. I remember reading this powerful statement and feeling, as a teacher educator, challenged by it. She went on to tell the story of a child in her class.

Whilst the children were evidently excited to have a new person in the classroom, they were equally intent on understanding who exactly I was. Many of the children watched me from a distance and only openly engaged with me after several days. There was only one little girl who appeared to place her trust in me from the start, making her presence known by tapping me on the shoulder and gesticulating that she wanted to create a piece of art together. She proceeded to wordlessly engage me in a series of activities, and often glanced searchingly into my face for my answers and actions. All through the afternoon, her body language and intense gaze gave me an unnerving sense that she was weighing up the potential connection between us. I must have passed the test because from the next morning, she would insist on doing most, if not all, classroom tasks together Most importantly, the rapport we developed resulted in her becoming very willing to learn. English was most probably her fourth if not fifth language and so classes were far from easy for her. However, her respect for our relationship meant that if I asked her to complete a task, she was most willing to apply herself to it. This understanding of respect for a respected elder’s wishes and expectations was something I had not come across before in a child so young. I found her determination (and reasons for applying herself) both inspiring and humbling.

I knew very little about this student outside of the classroom context. And yet, I felt as if I knew her quite well. This was because the relationship was grounded in mutual respect for each other as two people sharing an experience together in the present moment, rather than a detailed understanding of each other’s pasts or futures.... Our time spent together enabled her to grow in her understanding of Western educational ideas and concepts, and me in my understanding of teaching and learning. In this way, we shared the educational journey together. one day I arrived at school to learn that she had gone back to her Country. I was sorry not to have been able to say goodbye. But in many ways, it ended in the way it started: suddenly, unceremoniously and mysteriously.

Cordelia felt that the type of relationship she developed with this student was very different from the role of teacher-student relationship that is taught at university or state schools. Whilst her previous pre-service experiences had taught her the importance of promoting and supporting positive relationships between teachers and students, relationship building with Indigenous children was more than this. It required a ‘mutual understanding and respect; with any ideas of hierarchy and condescension being swiftly replaced with an understanding that both the teacher and the student have knowledge to impart and share with one another’. She said it was ‘confronting’, ‘unnerving’, but ‘ultimately humbling if you can allow yourself to realise that despite being the teacher, you can learn much from your student yourself’.

Her narrative ended in a similar way it began by her pondering the journey ahead

As a white pre-service teacher, I feel I am teetering on a professional precipice. As much as I am drawn to working in Indigenous communities, am I just continuing the cycle of white interference in communities that had done very well without us? Or do I plough ahead with new insights and seek to rectify my predecessors’ mistakes? I am as yet unsure, but I will continue to hold on to my mentor’s advice and keep an open mind to all possibilities.

Ryan's Story

Ryan's story began with the excitement of being selected to embark on what he knew would be a powerful professional learning journey 'liv[ing] and teach[ing] in an Indigenous community'. He saw this as, finally, a chance to have a richer understanding of what he had learned at university. He began his story by recounting his flight with a group other students in a small aircraft looking out of the window and seeing 'coastal islands, turquoise waters and rugged green bushlands all of which were set against a bright red earth'.

He then wrote about how fortunate he was to attend the 'Learning on Country' camp with his mentor and teacher during the first three days of the experience. The Learning on Country camps are an annual event at this school that run over two weeks during August. Members of the Language and Culture team take groups of students in the middle and upper primary, and secondary areas of the school out for two nights to 'Learn on Country', involving a number of cultural and hunting activities.

I had met my placement grade and mentor for no longer than one hour before we hit the hard-red dirt in two mini buses and two Troop carriers. The Year 4, 5 & 6 students were elated, as this was the first school camp for many and a first time in the back of a luxury 4-wheel drive. My tent mate was an Indigenous man of a similar age to me and he instantly enthralled me with the telling of many of the dreamtime stories. Sitting there and listening to his stories, I could not help but feel humbled and honoured to be camping on Traditional Sacred Land, with rich tapestries of culture, histories and spirits present.

Ryan explained how he learned many things whilst on this camp. In addition to developing relationships with the students he learned about 'bush medicine', 'bush survival' and what he called 'culture'. The camp made him much more at ease due to being able to get to know the students and his mentor teacher in a less formal setting. He was surprised about the level of diversity of students in his class with children coming from five different states in Australia, but also amazed at 'how talented' the student were with some having English as their 'second, third or fourth language'. The students were 'happy to be at school', 'engaged', and they displayed 'great curiosity and interest' in 'the curriculum and the lessons being presented'. The school embraced the 'local Indigenous knowledge and culture' which allowed the children to 'be themselves and feel comfortable' in the school setting. Ryan praised the 'Language and Culture team' at the school for their work in this area. As I read Ryan's reflections, I remember thinking how delightfully refreshing it was to hear stories that countered the negative discourse that so often surrounds these communities and schools.

Ryan ended his story with a summary of what he had learned suggesting that he learned far more than he had expected

Throughout my three weeks of placement, I learnt far more than I expected, from the unbribed curiosity of Indigenous children, to the day-in day-out life within a remote Indigenous community and of course, to the tastiness of the barramundi we had caught twenty minutes prior and cooked over a small makeshift fire pit. Most importantly in this setting of deep and rich culture, I was made to feel I belonged, changing my path in life for a lifetime. Not only was I inspired during this time, but I returned refreshed and energised with a strong sense

of purpose to fulfil a career working in Indigenous communities, learning their language, customs, histories and cultures. As of now, I am driven and determined like nothing before.

Ryan's practicum was life changing for him. He was humbled by what he had learned and held a deep level of respect for the community and school.

Tanya's Story

Similar to Ryan, Tanya's story began with a level of excitement about being selected, and about what she would learn 'in a multitude of ways as a teacher'

I felt that it would provide me with the opportunity to hear first-hand from remote teachers, offering me a unique insight into life and remote indigenous communities.....It would afford me the opportunity to work closely with local Indigenous teachers, students and the community, further benefitting my studies and future in teaching, but also my personal growth.

She wrote about how this would help to build her professional skills and knowledge in her current workplace where she was working with Indigenous children. Like Cordelia, Tanya had tried to approach the placement with few expectations. She wanted to go in 'open minded', although she confessed to doing some background work to get a sense of the community she was entering including watching a documentary on television and talking to 'family and friends'.

She had been concerned about what resources might be available to her in the school but was surprised at how well-resourced the school was. In her own words, 'they had a wonderful cultural section, stable internet, and the teachers and teaching assistants were a great source of knowledge'.

Through her reading and research into education in remote communities, Tanya had anticipated that school attendance would be an issue for these communities, and yet she was still surprised at how children came to school at irregular times and often did not return after lunch. Similarly through her reading about these issues, she had expected educational achievement to be low but felt these students were not given due credit for what they were capable of.

I felt that they were being let down (not in the school, but nationally) as I realized that these students didn't get the recognition they deserve. They may not be ranked the highest on tests like NAPLAN but they knew about four languages plus English..... What they could tell me about their land and culture, how they looked out for each other and aided each other in the classroom, I felt they were cheated and these skills need to be recognised.

She went on to say how she was amazed how the children were content with so little and how they made 'real play' an integral part of their lives.

I saw play, real play, as children used things within their environment to make into toys. Swords out of dried pandanus leaves, a boat made from cuttle fish speared onto the end of a stick so that it could be pushed through the water, the simple games of flipping over each other, dancing, singing. I heard so much laughter and not once did I hear a child say "I am BORED". I long for that for my students now back home, to enjoy the simple things.

Again as with the previous two stories, I was heartened by the way Tanya perceived and talked about the children and communities in positive ways. Like Ryan, the 'Learning on Country' camp was a highlight for Tanya.

'Learning on country' camp was the highlight of my time on placement. I was nervous and a little apprehensive at first only having two days within the school environment beforehand and being the only pre-service teacher going at that time. The experience though was amazing, it allowed me to get to know the students outside of the classroom. This became beneficial later when I was teaching in the classroom I think getting to know my students within an environment they were more comfortable in allowed for me to gain a better understanding of them....

Listening to elders share stories of their ancestors in the evening, speaking in language was magical...I experienced and observed how strongly grounded my students were in storytelling. Listening to those stories made me feel at ease in the evenings when everything was dark and those strange noises didn't seem to bother me as much....

Learning how to make spears, weaving, finding 'bush tucker' under the guidance of the elders.....The students learnt about sustainability, it was a strong part of their culture. Only take what they need. Such an important lesson...to respect and care for nature and follow in the footsteps of their ancestors.

Tanya recalled the group's daily afternoon walk to the barge landing to capture each sunset. She reflected how each evening, at around this time, the children would play often with no 'adult supervision', which prompted her to reflect on her own childhood and her growing concern for other children who do not spend enough time outdoors playing.

Tanya had plenty to say, also, about life in the classroom. She wrote about how she came to appreciate the importance of making learning relevant to students' lives.

When my lessons were applicable to their everyday activities I began to observe results improving significantly. I related writing and reading to them through the use of a text 'We're going on a croc hunt'. Having the students act out the story in the classroom and then planning a 'croc hunt' excursion to Barge Landing the students were engaged and keen to write their own version of 'Were going on a croc hunt in Maningrida', using places that were familiar to them. I also tried to use the students' culture of telling stories, something I had observed the elders doing. I tried to incorporate more 'hands on' learning and a greater variety of practical experiences into the lessons.

She wrote about the critical role that the Indigenous teaching assistants played in the classroom due to their deep level of knowledge about the children, language and culture. They were a critical 'link between the white man and Indigenous ways'. And she wrote about her fascination with the 'kinship' system and how this means 'you will always have a family' where you belong. It made her reflect on the proverb that 'it takes a village to raise a child' and how we could all benefit from thinking more about this.

Tanya's story ended with her acknowledgement of how she saw the development of great leaders within the community. She had come away from her placement 'overwhelmed by the enormous volume of knowledge and a deep feeling of appreciation to the students, community members, teachers and teaching assistants who taught me so much and look forward to going back'. Like Ryan's story, there was a deep level of gratitude and respect for what she had experienced during her time in the school and community.

Teanau's Story

The final story I want to share began with Teanau sharing her fear of the unknown.

The anxieties of travelling with a bunch of strangers to a remote area, working with Indigenous children, families and people of the community was overwhelming. I was afraid that I might say the wrong thing at any time, or not know enough, or be rejected. The build-up was the worst, because I didn't really understand what I had signed up to do and I was terrified of the unknowns and challenges, but I also felt peace that this experience was going to have a major impact on my life, and could very well be the beginning of a passionate lifetime career.

It turned out to be, she wrote, a 'journey of continual learning' from the moment she got on the plane in Melbourne. Whilst she acknowledged having completed her Indigenous studies unit in her course back in Melbourne, as well as participating in the induction program and doing other individual research about the community, all of this preparation could only so much to prepare her for what was to come: 'I don't think there could have been anything that could really help me understand what it was like, apart from experiencing it firsthand'. Reading this in Teanau's story as one of the lecturers who had tried to prepare Teanau and the other students for the placement, I felt an urgent need to ask her to expand on this. I wondered, as I did so often, how we might rethink the ways we prepared our students for this placement.

Much of the remainder of Teanau's narrative was a collection of memorable moments during her experience. She wrote about her desire to attend the local church across the road from the school. To her dismay, there were no services held on her first two weekends but was excited when she found the church open on her final day. She cites this as one of her memorable experiences.

My friend and I entered and asked if it was okay for us to join, and the gathered few nodded with smiles. There was one lady who worked in the Family room, at the school who led the small church group, with approximately 7 children, and 3 mothers, those being Indigenous families. We sat together in a circle on the floor, and sang a handful of Christian songs, one of them was sung in one of the languages of the community.....The joy amongst the group of us was overwhelming, and the children approached me the next day at school, extending to more relationships being built within the school community.

Her gaze returned briefly to the classroom.

This lesson involved a real practical nature, looking at items that [the students] see every day, and how to cut them in half, and what a half represented. It included, crabs, fidget spinners (one of the students had one in the classroom), a football (was very popular to play at lunch time) and more. We had just finished, and were outside for lunch, and one of the Indigenous students, came up to me, and had broken his cookie in half, and said "look, half". Other students then began splitting whatever food they had in half, and were talking about it and comparing them amongst their friends. This was a major victory to me, and I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. I was mostly happy that my focus on drawing on objects from their environment, throughout the lesson to explain the concept, really solidified their understanding, and this was shown when they followed on the concept with their lunch items.

Next she wrote about her involvement in the student council and how she was lucky to attend meetings held each week. The issues they tackled on this council included

'taking a stronger stance on rubbish in the school community, and finding safe spaces for students to go within the school'. She concluded this memory by saying 'it was great to be a part of a school community body of students, who were driven to seeing positive change, and seeing younger students and older students working together'. And she reflected about how she would like to implement similar ideas when teaching when she completed her course.

Once again, the 'Learning on Country' camp featured as a highlight of her placement:

This experience was an amazing flip to school, as I was the one soaking up any information they were willing to share. They were in control, and they lead me to learn things about their Country, which I was so grateful and appreciative for.

Teana's final memorable experience concerned a relationship she developed with one of the children who had experienced some trauma in her life. The child was initially wary, and yet over the three weeks the relationship strengthened. She recalled feeling overwhelmed when the child took a bracelet from her arm and offered it to her on her last day: 'I still haven't taken it off, being three months since I left'.

To end her story Teana mentioned some of the challenges she had experienced. These included: the use in the classroom of a phonics program called 'Jolly Phonics' (which she believed was culturally and pedagogically inappropriate); the large number of dogs that roamed the community (she felt they were in need of care); and she had felt a little unsafe on the weekends when alcohol was allowed into the community.

She concluded with some advice: 'I feel that to work in a remote Indigenous community, you have to be open, be willing, be driven, be passionate, and really have a desire to understand the culture and their lived experiences. These are the qualities that helped support me to engage wholly in the experience, and I absolutely loved it'.

Analysing the Stories

In my analysis of the stories of Cordelia, Ryan, Tanya and Teana, I tried to understand the stories in a way that might help me to unpack both the individual and the collective learning experiences of these pre-service teachers. As I read through the stories again and again, it was apparent that there were many unanswered questions for these pre-service teachers. There were instances where they questioned things they experienced both in the school and the community. There were times when they were surprised about what they had learned, and times where they questioned themselves and others. And there were moments of certainty and uncertainty, revelatory moments and moments of discomfort. I have chosen just four storylines that I saw as common to their narratives.

Stories of Equity and Social Justice

All of the students showed that they entered into their remote placement with a desire to experience and/or work in Indigenous contexts. They had all learned about Indigenous perspectives on teaching and learning in their university-based teacher education course, and now they wanted to have a better sense of what that might ‘look like’ and feel like. Ryan’s words could be seen as speaking for all students on this placement: ‘I had previously completed a unit on Indigenous studies, and throughout other units at University I have passionately explored the educational rights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children deserve. This was the small spark for the reason of embarking on this journey’. The choice of the word ‘deserve’ suggests a belief that this was a ‘right’ that they (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children) were not currently experiencing. This group of pre-service teachers clearly wanted to commit to this cause.

Throughout the stories, there was a sense that these pre-service teachers held [strong?] views and questioned issues related to equity and social justice in this space. Whilst they knew and expected that educational outcomes for Indigenous children would be lower than non-Indigenous children, they all wrote about the children they worked with in positive ways. This often presented alongside how concerned they were with the disturbing issues of poverty and ill health that affected some children. They described the children’s abilities to speak in a number of different languages, their creative endeavours, their story telling techniques, resilience and the fact they were highly motivated children.

The narratives also contained accounts of learning experiences where the pre-service teachers had made a determined effort to connect to the experiences and knowledge of the children and how they witnessed children learning. They felt that the abilities of the children were not adequately represented in reporting on national and literacy tests and the deficit stories told about them in the Australian news media. In contrast, the ‘stories’ related by these pre-service teacher emphasised the abilities, capabilities and positive qualities of the Indigenous learners they taught and came to know in just 3 weeks.

Stories of Building Relationships and Collaboration

The pre-service teachers variably recounted experiences where they developed meaningful relationships with children, teacher colleagues and others on the community. Cordelia claimed that she developed a very different understanding of the role of the teacher-student relationship from the one she had encountered at university. Teanau recalled the relationship she developed with a student as one of her ‘most memorable experiences’. All spoke of these relationships as different from the relationships they had experienced in other educational settings. Herbert (2007) highlights the importance of relationship work in developing partnerships with Indigenous communities.

She says that this work requires honesty, and involves making an unwritten agreement 'to listen', and 'to reflect' on what is said 'within the framework of your own understandings' (p. 47). Developing relationships with the children in this school and others in the community was seen as an important part of working with them. As pre-service teachers talked about their various relationships, there was a sense that they had a deep respect for the children and people they met. There was also the sense as I read through these stories that these pre-service teachers had learned the crucial importance of working collaboratively with both the community and school.

Stories of the 'Right' Pedagogy

There were numerous examples throughout the stories related to classroom pedagogy. Cordelia wrote that she felt she needed to 'abandon all previously tried-and-tested pedagogical methods' and let the relationship you had developed with the individual child guide you. All of the success stories which the pre-service teachers recalled were where they made a determined effort to connect to the lifeworlds and experiences of the students they worked with. They saw the benefit of allowing children to learn through play. There were also examples of the pre-service teachers questioning existing pedagogical practices. Teanau recalled the use of an American based phonics program in her class which she felt was culturally and pedagogically inappropriate.

Stories of Learning on Country

There were numerous references in the stories to learning about culture. In particular, the three pre-service teachers who were afforded the opportunity of attending the Learning on Country camp recalled this as a highlight of their experience. They wrote about learning what foods to eat, listening to dreamtime stories, making spears, weaving and looking after the land. They made the most of opportunities to actively seek information from elders and Indigenous teaching assistants in the school and some wrote about the fact that they had a real desire to keep learning in this space. The pre-service teachers were in awe of the multiple languages that these children knew and some made an effort to learn aspects of language to help them communicate more effectively with the children.

One of the most significant aspects of their references to learning about culture was that it was not limited to simply learning about a body of knowledge that people have about a particular society. Rather, it included a deeper understanding which involves understanding themselves in relation to another culture. It required understanding how their own culture shapes their perceptions of themselves, their world and their relationships with others. There was evidence of the pre-service teachers working through this complex issue as they wrote about their various anxieties, fears and concerns.

Teana commented, ‘I was afraid that I might say the wrong thing at any time, or not know enough, or be rejected’. Cordelia wrote,

I do not presume to understand the full impact of white colonialism on Indigenous groups in Australia, but I do believe that such experiences of dispossession and abuse could potentially foster an enduring strength of identity in people. So I sought out Indigenous teaching assistants and elders of the community in an attempt to better understand the community’s reconciliation with the impact of colonialism”.

She then reflected further,

I find it rather extraordinary that a group of people who lived largely harmoniously until the arrival and subsequent destruction wrought by *ballanders* could be willing to work with the very same people 200 years later to create opportunities for their children that will (in many ways) move them further away from their traditional ways of life. But what else can be done? The influence of colonialism has resulted in an Australian society that values capitalism and social mobility above all else. The community recognise that education is the only viable option to improve their children’s futures, and so they have made a decision to commit to the cause. It is far from a relinquishment of their culture or values, but rather a wise solution to a potentially insurmountable problem”.

This group of pre-service teachers was clearly in the ‘contact zone’, a space described by Somerville and Perkins (2003) as a place where different stories or lifeworlds might meet, intersect and negotiate difference. Like Somerville and Perkins, these pre-service students saw this as highly significant for the developing relationship between Indigenous and other marginalised knowledges and Western academic thought. Whilst potentially a ‘risky’ idea, it does have the potential for opening up ‘new possibilities’ which are potentially transformative.

Concluding Story

The experience of this remote placement for Cordelia, Ryan, Tanya and Teana was one of continual learning. Their previous learning about working in the Indigenous space both at university and in the work context had fuelled their desires to learn more. They embarked on the placement with open minds, few expectations, and a desire to learn as much as they could. There was strong evidence throughout the stories that these pre-service teachers were working towards becoming more culturally and pedagogically prepared to work in this space, which has been identified as an important aspect of working in these communities (Falcon & Jacob, 2011; Sullivan and Johnson 2012; Warren & Quine, 2013).

Postscript

The reading of these stories suggest that these pre-service teachers were deeply involved in the important process of reconciliation as part of this placement. They desired to improve the outcomes for these students so Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander children might participate equally in all areas of life. They realised the importance of building positive relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians and of working collaboratively in this space. They were determined to learn about histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. And, while remaining positive in their outlook on working with Indigenous learners, they did not shy away from reflecting on the wrongs of the past (see Reconciliation Australia, 2016).

Not evidenced in the stories I have related above, I have learned through in more recent informal communications that one pre-service teacher is taking up a position in a remote community in 2018, and one is returning to do another remote placement in 2018. And for the other two, the possibilities of exploring future work in these communities are still open.

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