

# Chapter 9

## Preparing Pre-service Teachers to Teach Literacy in Remote Spaces



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**Abstract** Remote Indigenous communities are often seen as challenging places in which to teach for a range of reasons. Student attendance is erratic, and teachers can feel that their work is not effective. Additionally, remote communities are culturally as well as geographically very isolated, with limited access to services (Price K, Teacher education for high poverty schools. Springer, New York, 2016). Hence, it is often difficult to attract and retain teachers, and those teachers who do take up jobs in remote schools may not feel they have been adequately prepared to work in those settings. In recent years, universities and education departments have put in place a number of initiatives to attract and retain “good” teachers in these communities. For example, several universities offer placement experiences for pre-service teachers to help them develop some understanding of what it means to work and live in remote communities and for them to develop their pedagogical skills to work effectively with Indigenous learners. In this chapter we examine the kinds of knowledge and skills that pre-service teachers need in order to work in the literacy space in remote schools. Our study refers to data from interviews with pre-service teachers, community members and school personnel. It focuses on preparedness for teaching literacy in remote settings, the disconnects between the pre-service curriculum and the expectations of schools and departments and pre-service teachers’ expectations versus the realities of their lived experience on community. Data is drawn from a broader study which sought to understand how we might better plan, implement and prepare pre-service teachers for remote teaching placements so that we might provide guidance for universities, jurisdictions and policy-makers.

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## Setting the Context

Just over one quarter of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reside in remote or very remote locations (ABS 2013). Nonetheless, the majority of schools in remote or very remote locations have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments greater than 90%. Remote communities are generally categorised as areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage. For example, in the Northern Territory, 36 out of the 38 schools that are classified “very remote” have an Index of Community Social-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) below 800, well below the average score of 1000 (ACARA 2017). Remote schools are therefore mostly described as high-needs schools and present a number of challenges for both students and teachers (Price 2016). As has been reported elsewhere in this book, students in remote locations in Australia fare worse than their urban peers in standardised tests of literacy and numeracy achievement. Teachers often don’t feel effective, and this has attendant problems of stress, anxiety and ultimately teacher turnover.

The difficulty of adequately preparing teachers to work in the remote space has long been recognised. In 2000 the Senate Employment Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee (2000) said:

Though Indigenous education represents a significant challenge for teachers and requires high levels of skill and sensitivity to the needs of students, many teachers in Indigenous communities were amongst the most inexperienced and least adequately prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in such demanding and unfamiliar environments. (p. 103)

Almost a decade later in a survey conducted by the Australian Education Union of 1545 teachers, 75% felt their Initial Teacher Education (henceforth ITE) had not prepared them to teach Indigenous students (Labone et al. 2014).

In recent years a number of initiatives and policy imperatives have been put in place to try and redress the issues of teacher preparedness and retention in remote and very remote communities. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership has developed professional standards for graduating students, two of which are specifically Indigenous focused. One of these two standards focuses on effective strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the other requires teachers to show a respect and understanding of students (AITSL 2011). The standards mean that universities must include relevant content in their courses (Anderson and Atkinson 2014).

A review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (Wilson 2014) put forward a number of recommendations concerning what and how the Department of Education should negotiate with ITE providers. With respect to literacy, the report suggested that ITE should attend to evidence-based approaches (incorporating phonological awareness and phonics, teaching EAL/D learners and assessment), as well as Indigenous languages, cultural awareness and community engagement. Similarly, education departments have been looking seriously at how best to recruit teachers to remote and very remote locations. In 2010 the then 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

involved a number of stages aimed to assess applicants' suitability for working in these contexts (Brasche and Harrington 2013).

One recommendation of the Wilson report was that, where possible, pre-service teachers undertake a practicum in at least one remote school (Wilson 2014). As a result many universities are now offering professional experience opportunities in remote schools. This has been an area of expansion with the emergence of a recent research agenda into the challenges and opportunities for doing this work (see, e.g. Auld et al. 2016; Brasche and Harrington 2013; Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012; Rennie et al. 2018).

Whilst the remote practicum can be a window into life as a remote teacher, planning for and enacting this work is not without its challenges (Osborne 2003). In addition to logistical considerations such as placement planning and coordinating, expense, geographical isolation and challenges of finding suitable accommodation for pre-service teachers, there is also the issue of how well prepared pre-service teachers are to teach and live in remote places (Auld et al. 2016; Sharplin 2002; Yarrow et al. 1999).

Research has highlighted the importance of ensuring that students have the necessary knowledge to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities and to employ culturally relevant pedagogies. For example, one of the main recommendations of the Indigenous Cultural Competency (ICC) Reform in Australian Universities (2011) project was for all university graduates to "have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities" (DEEWR 2011, p. 9). This project also noted that Australian universities should aim to produce teaching graduates "who have a comprehensive understanding of ... remote education grounded in practical experience and theoretical knowledge" (DEEWR 2011, p. 3). However, it is difficult to know exactly how this should be enacted in the literacy space. Understanding how to prepare pre-service teachers to teach literacy is paramount given the national priority in improving literacy outcomes for Indigenous students (Commonwealth of Australia 2018).

## The Study

The data discussed in this chapter was part of a larger project that implemented and evaluated a remote teaching placement funded through a grant received in 2015 from the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Federal Government). The project was designed to address the national agenda developing a teaching force that is better prepared to work in remote and very remote communities, by providing pre-service teachers with an opportunity to explore career opportunities that they may not ordinarily have considered. In planning the experience we were conscious of the need to adequately prepare teachers, so we worked closely with communities and schools to develop an induction program that was tailored to their specific needs. Further, we

used a rigorous selection process to ensure that we sent teachers who were best suited for the experience.

Interviews were used as the primary source of data collection to understand the experiences of various stakeholders in the students' remote placements. Ethics approval was granted by Monash University for the project. We interviewed two principals, two assistant principals, seven mentor teachers, two Indigenous teaching assistants and ten pre-service teachers. With the exception of the pre-service teachers who were interviewed both pre- and post-placement, all of the other stakeholders were interviewed once post-placement. The interview included a number of questions about the development and implementation of the placement, how well we worked with the school and community in this regard and how well prepared our pre-service teachers were to work in this space. We also asked questions specifically about preparation for teaching literacy, and it is this aspect of the study that we focus on here. Transcripts from each of the groups interviewed were analysed using an inductive process, based on assumptions of interpretive qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln 1981). Common themes were identified in relation to what each group thought was important for the planning and implementation of this work. Constant and comparative analysis of the data developed a set of inductive categories that emerged by sorting the data into key themes. The following presents a discussion of these findings.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In the following sections, we first present the data collected from the pre-service teachers, teachers, assistant teachers and principals.

### ***Expectations Versus Reality***

All of the pre-service teachers noted that although they had understood that the students they would be working with would have low literacy levels, they had no idea what this actually meant or looked like until they worked with the students.

One pre-service teacher commented,

I guess my expectations going in were in hindsight maybe too optimistic in terms of the education standards I was expecting. I think it's easy for us to read in a text book or be told in a lecture that remote Indigenous communities are facing, really low levels of literacy and numeracy and that it's really not improving, how we need it to improve, and I think even hearing that, I was like, 'Yeah I can understand why that's happening and why it's a problem and why we need to fix it.' But I don't think I pictured in my head exactly what it looked like.

All of the pre-service teachers interviewed were challenged by finding that many students in their class were between 3 and 5 years behind their expected year levels and that the students struggled with their spoken English, reading and writing.

Throughout the interviews it was apparent that the majority of the pre-service teachers felt unsettled by this. This sentiment is summed up in the following comment:

I think it was pretty heartbreaking. I mean, it's heartbreaking hearing it, and having an optimistic expectation, and then being put in a classroom with 15 year olds whose only written English capability is writing their name, their first name, and beyond that not being able to write anything, needing one on one attention to kind of do anything. It was just - I think I probably just didn't realise what kind of issues would result from having such poor literacy and numeracy levels.

Despite this, they were all in awe of what the students could do and felt the students were not well served by the system. One pre-service teacher commented:

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 recognized.

Similarly, another said:

It was the most eye opening experience I've had since starting university, and it's kind of put me on a bit of a course of motivation to get something done. Like it was depressing and yet so rewarding at the same time, because the kids are amazing and some of those teachers are amazing, and some of the community members are just amazing. But overall it's a really crappy situation and something needs to change. Because it's not good enough for us to be sitting in Melbourne and turning a blind eye to what's going on in our country. Like it's not a different country that we're talking about.

Interviews with mentor teachers and principals were consistent with the pre-service teachers' comments. The teachers and principals talked about their perceptions that the pre-service teachers felt overwhelmed by many things when they arrive on community. These include the literacy and numeracy levels of the students, behaviour management, cultural and language differences and being on community. Many echoed the sentiment that nothing can really prepare them for what they experience and that they have to be willing to watch and learn.

One principal commented:

Because it is a tough gig and we want somebody that's going to be flexible but prepared as well, open minded, definitely culturally competent.

And another teacher said:

Doesn't matter how much you're told, nothing can prepare you. It really is experience and it really is breaking down and going through the hardship and coming up because so much of the learning is relationship building. For these kids to teach literacy and numeracy a good relationship is the foundation.

## *Teaching Literacy on Community*

In the pre-placement interviews the pre-service teachers were asked how prepared they felt to teach literacy. Responses to this question were mixed. Some said that they did not feel that confident as they had limited units in their courses about literacy instruction with some completing two units and others only one. Others said that they would be challenged by working in a community where there were several languages spoken other than English. Three had prior experience working with English language learners in places such as Fiji and they felt this might help them.

During the pre-placement interviews the pre-service teachers made clear that they had little idea how they would go about teaching literacy in the remote classrooms. They all assumed that there would be a focus on the early stages of learning to read and write but found it difficult to talk about key skills and strategies that they might need to use to do this, despite having undertaken studies about approaches to literacy teaching. During the post-placement interviews they echoed similar sentiments. All reflected on how challenging it had been, particularly working in classrooms where there was such a wide range of abilities and where students were often in excess of 4 years below the expected level.

Every pre-service teacher interviewed talked about a need for guidance in their university classes about working with students who have English as an additional language (EAL). One commented:

When EAL students are really struggling to express themselves to me I need to know strategies to help them to understand better. Sometimes I would talk to the Indigenous kids and I knew they didn't really understand so I needed more strategies to help me with this.

Another similarly said:

I think I would have benefited from a unit on teaching EAL students because I am sure there are different techniques or strategies that might be more effective for working with these students.

One of the mentor teachers also echoed these frustrations experienced by the pre-service teachers saying:

Well, my gut feeling is they have the theoretical knowledge but when it comes to practical knowledge sometimes they feel it's an eye-opening experience so when she tries to explain something and the student is not really getting it because her first language is English and this kid's first language is not English.

The pre-service teachers all said they needed much knowledge about teaching early reading and writing. They felt we "brush over this" and don't spend enough time actually understanding what various strategies for working with students look like in practice.

All of the principals and the majority of the teachers in this study agreed that the pre-service teachers would benefit from having more knowledge about how to work effectively with EAL students. One commented:

Well I think in general, even teachers that we have, there seems to be a lack of knowledge around English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and I think that's something

that as a system we need to be working on. I think that definitely with having 98 percent of the students here as English being their third, fourth or fifth language, that's definitely something that they would benefit from.

Others also discussed what they termed “basic EAL pedagogies” such as “scaffolding”, “modelling” and “breaking things down” as important for students to understand. Three of those interviewed also commented that it would be useful for pre-service teachers to have an understanding of the Northern Territory ESL levels and the Australian Curriculum EAL/D learning progression. Certainly, many of the teachers were empathetic towards their students, recognising the challenge of learning in English as a second, third or fourth language. One teacher commented:

What these guys [the pre-service teachers] need to know is just because the literacy level is low it is no reflection of the child's intelligence. I think any white fellas who come out here should go through an induction process where it's run by community and they do a whole lesson or they do a whole meeting in language with you and then act like some teachers do, telling people off for not having anything written on their paper, keep them in afterwards and say, 'You're going to do this,' just to understand the world that the kids are coming from.

Finally, teachers talked about other specific techniques that they used in their own classrooms to supplement their literacy teaching such as phonics work, conducting running records and guided reading as being important knowledge for pre-service teachers to have. However, there was often a reluctance to hand over the reins to pre-service teachers when they felt it was a program or technique that they felt required particular expertise or skills as the following comments show:

In my literacy block I start off with guided reading so while I'm doing the guided reading the kids are doing literacy rotations which you saw this morning. That was fine for the pre-service teacher to do the literacy rotations but not the guided reading and really it was difficult to try and find a time for her to start developing that in just one week of full control. She said she'd seen guided reading but she'd never really experienced it.

The collective comments from both pre-service teachers and school personnel raise a number of questions in relation to what kind of preparation might be ideal for students undertaking a practicum in a remote community.

### ***Program Preparation and Perceptions***

All of the interviewees talked about whole-school approaches to literacy in their respective schools. At the time of this study one of the schools was using direct instruction (henceforth DI) and the other accelerated literacy (henceforth AL).

Accelerated literacy (AL) pedagogy is an approach to language and literacy instruction that is designed to cater for “educationally marginalised” students (Cowey 2005; Gray 2007). The approach was developed and used extensively throughout remote schools in the Northern Territory from 2004 until 2009, when it received Commonwealth funding under the National Accelerated Literacy Program

(NALP) (Robinson et al. 2009). The approach requires rigorous initial training for teachers and continuing support from mentors or experts who can help teachers plan and can provide feedback on lessons. After the NALP period, only a few remote schools in the Northern Territory continued to invest their own resources in maintaining the level of support required for the program (see Chap. 14).

Direct instruction was developed in the United States in the 1960s (Engelmann and Engelmann 1966). The approach was originally designed to address the needs of children with learning difficulties. Based on behaviourist theories of learning, it breaks each task down into smaller tasks. Students need to master each task before moving on to the next. Students are grouped according to ability and teachers follow carefully scripted lessons. Direct instruction has been implemented in remote Northern Territory schools since 2015, again supported by a grant from the Commonwealth government. Whilst it has been embraced by some teachers who welcome the structure, many others are deeply uncomfortable with the lack of flexibility and the level of scripting required (see Chap. 13).

Preparedness to work in both these programs was a concern to the pre-service teachers and to the school personnel. The principals and mentor teachers noted that it would be useful for pre-service teachers to have some knowledge of their respective whole-school approaches. One principal said:

I don't know if you want to add the programs into your university courses but you just need to say that we use these programs - AL, Jolly Phonics, Words their Way. This is how we map students against that the ESL band scales. So give them some links to get a bit more information, and get the students to do some homework before they arrive at the school.

Despite this they all understood the complexities and challenges of universities teaching pre-service teachers about particular whole-school approaches. They highlighted that these whole-school approaches often change due to funding no longer being available to support their implementation as was the case with AL. Direct instruction was rolled out in a number of schools once funding support was made available from the Commonwealth government. One principal said:

But that could all change with a new boss and then AL could go out and something else could come in but I think there are some basic things about modelling and scaffolding and breaking work down that would be really useful. Some basic ESL pedagogies. Because that's all part of AL.

The principal recognised that teaching about specific programs was problematic due to their propensity to change, but also reiterated the importance of teaching some of the important theoretical ideas underpinning AL, especially around modelling and scaffolding children's learning.

Both schools invested heavily in training their teachers for both AL and DI and both programs rely on a level of expertise and consistency in the approach taken by teachers. The pre-service teachers were keen to learn about these programs although the opportunities they had to do this in situ varied. Many talked about the fact that teachers in the school where AL was taught were often reluctant to hand over the reins to the pre-service teachers. The students in the AL school overwhelmingly felt that they were being kept in the dark about the approach and were not being given



insight into the basis of the approach. Without a full induction they found it difficult to appreciate the foundations and rationale of the various teaching strategies used. One student commented:

I taught pretty much everything except AL. They were kind of precious about AL – she said like it takes way too long for you to learn it – you’re not going to get your head around it and what I could see her doing I didn’t really see how I couldn’t have been doing it but maybe she was asking them a lot of questions I wouldn’t have thought to ask.

In contrast, the students in the DI school were provided with more opportunities to learn about and teach into the program. At the time of this study, DI was under a process of evaluation so the school was obliged to maintain fidelity and staff were understandably nervous about classes being led by teachers who hadn’t been inducted, regardless of their skill level.

One principal described this:

Well just with our school being a direct instruction school, we have practice sessions which are like staff meetings and PD’s twice a week after school for our teachers and we had the student teachers attend those as well. They were also offered coaching and support with direct instruction and practicing their script and working closely, doing team teaching with their mentor teacher, but also working with our direct instruction in school coach.

Despite being to some extent excluded from using the whole-school approaches, the pre-service teachers did their best to make sense of them. Given they had little understanding of the foundations and rationales of these programs, they often used key theoretical ideas that were highlighted as important from their university course to reflect on the programs and their learning. Thus the pre-service teachers at the AL school noted the benefits in a program which relies heavily on scaffolding students’ English literacy and related what they learned about scaffolding at university to what they saw in their classrooms. One pre-service also talked about students being familiar with the routines of the AL program and liked the fact that the students were clear about the learning intentions, another concept they had learned as being important in their university classes. They went on to say that they would probably adopt the technique and would like to learn more about the program. On the other hand, they also questioned what they perceived to be the “repetitive” nature of the program and they questioned how students were exposed to limited literature due to the fact that so much time was spent working on one text. One said she tried to find more opportunities to simply “read to the children” as she had learned this was important at university.

The two pre-service teachers in the DI school found less congruence between what they had learned at university and what they experienced in the DI program. They spoke about the structured and repetitive nature of the program which they felt oftentimes “took the joy out of teaching” for them. Both described how students were placed into ability groups for instruction and talked about progressing through various graded teacher manuals and student workbooks. There was a sense that the implementation of DI was much more rigidly structured than that of AL. They talked about scripts that they had to follow to deliver the various lessons and how they were forbidden to go off script. One pre-service teacher talked about a time

when she felt the need to try something different and go off the script during a DI maths session. She also reflected on her learning from university but could not match what she experienced in DI and what she had learned at university:

Like you can't deviate from the script. Like when Inge told you she put something up on the whiteboard and thought we're going to get into trouble. I had a moment like that as well. Like there's a maths song called skip counting because we were learning skip counting in DI maths they had a song on 'go noodle' so I asked my mentor teacher if I could use it and she was like that's fine just don't tell anyone. The kids loved it by the end after watching about three times they could skip count. Whereas the first initial DI lesson wasn't working cause they weren't paying attention but they had learned the song and it had movements so it was all kinaesthetic musical learning at the same time so I feel like that's what I learned at University but it was kind of deviating from the script and I wasn't allowed to talk about it.

In contrast to the pre-service teachers who experienced AL, the consensus amongst those who experienced DI was that one would find it difficult to teach in a DI school. One pre-service teacher struggled to find any congruence behind what she had learned about DI and her beliefs about teaching and learning more generally:

I don't think I could teach in a DI school. When delivering the DI, I felt a disconnection between what I believe education should offer students, and what the program offered students. I felt unable to communicate high expectations (except in science where I taught 3 thirty minute sessions at the end of the day) and I felt that the DI positioned me as an 'all-knowing' teacher – and students as empty vessels. I do not believe that DI teaches students to think. It is also questionable that DI would never be *acceptable* for white children, so why is such a program acceptable for Indigenous students? I feel it upholds a deficit view of Indigenous students and their capabilities. Bound by DI, I was not able to design lessons which pertained to student's individual histories, values, interests, aspirations, community values or history.

The pre-service teachers also raised issues around the “buy in” from staff in the school in relation to both AL and DI. Whilst they acknowledged that there would seem to be a majority of teachers who were heavily invested in both programs at their respective schools, two of the pre-service teachers did talk about the fact that their mentor teachers were not so invested. This may be an endemic problem that schools in these contexts face when trying to adopt whole-school approaches to improve literacy outcomes which are significantly lower than the national average.

### *Communicating on Community*

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is related to building relationships and communicating with others. The pre-service teachers were mindful of a unit about Indigenous culture they had studied at university and sought to build their own cultural competence through developing relationships with students, school personnel and community that required cultural competence. However, they were

unsure what cultural competence might look like in practice and doubted their knowledge in this area. One said:

The cultural differences worries me as I don't want to offend. If I am not sure I'll ask the teacher first. I'll sit back a lot and listen. It's not really my fault I haven't learned about it. I want to be more culturally competent.

Two of the pre-service teachers expressed a need to learn more about appropriate ways of interacting. One pre-service teacher, herself Indigenous, recalled a moment where she reminded others about paying attention. Throughout the placement they demonstrated more sensitivity in the way they communicated with and engaged with cultural differences than the other students. She commented:

Like knowing what kinds of language and terminology and words to be using to not be offensive. Things like the word *corroboree* were thrown around like really flippantly. Like, I just don't know about saying that, and they're like, oh why? It's like just because it's not your word, it's not - their word. And when I kind of mentioned it, not looking for anything other than stop using the word, use *gathering*, or some other like less specific synonym, it was like oh why can't we? It seems like you're making a big deal about that. I was like oh, I'm not I don't think. Also when to use *Aboriginal* versus *Torres Strait Islander* versus both, versus *Indigenous*. It's a complicated kind of area of study, but it's important that people, especially people going into these communities, are using those words properly and being able to communicate well with both non-Indigenous people and Indigenous people.

All of the pre-service teachers talked about the importance of building relationships with students, the community and school. They discussed how the school was such an integral part of the community and spoke about the numerous coming and going of people:

The school had strong relationships with community. There were always people coming into the school and meetings going on. A few of the teachers had only been there for a year but a lot of teachers did have very strong connections to community and people.

Many talked about the importance of “stepping back”, watching and listening:

I learned that if you're going to go into a community a similar thing to what I just said you really have to let people come to you. You have to take a step back, listen and watch. I don't think forcing yourself is that great but doing it in a sensitive way where it doesn't look like your trying to force yourself is really important in a quite close knit community.

Finally, one pre-service teacher reflected on how building relationships with students is different to what she has previously experienced. She said that whilst at university and in other practicum placements we do “promote and support positive relationships between teachers and students”, relationship building with Indigenous children requires 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” and “unnerving”, but “ultimately humbling if you can allow yourself to realise that despite being the teacher, you can learn much from your student yourself”.

Like the pre-service teachers, the principals and teachers interviewed also talked about the importance of understanding how to interact in the community and of

building relationships with students, school personnel and people in the community.

The two principals praised this group of pre-service teachers for their understanding of the need to sit back, watch and listen and to know when it was appropriate to ask. One teacher said:

Nobody rushed in and expected they knew everything that they could – I know everything, therefore if I do this, this will happen. Sometimes that happens. Whereas it was quite a bit of sitting back waiting, finding out, rather than being proactive in that space, which is the better way to be. To wait, find out, if you don't know the proactive parties to ask, don't just assume. I don't think we had any issues in terms of any one of them doing something that was not quite right.

The teachers and principals also highlighted the importance of building good relationships whilst working in remote communities. One teacher said it was foundational to teaching and learning:

It really is experience and it really is breaking down and going through the hardship and coming up because so much of the learning is relationship building. For these kids, to teach literacy and numeracy, a good relationship is the foundation.

Relationships were also very important for the two Indigenous teaching assistants that were interviewed. In addition to discussing the importance of the need for pre-service teachers to understand how to “be” on community, build relationships and have an understanding of cultural rules, they also talked about the need to be able to work collaboratively with the Indigenous community, school community and students. They were clear that there needed to be a reciprocal relationship where all parties learn from each other. One commented:

Very important to know as soon as when they get into the class, we need to tell them about the rules, if that teacher doesn't know what's in our school. And how to get along with our children. It's very important that we need to see, from other teachers, that they need to show what they have learnt from them and what the students have learnt from them. Like it's just working together. When the students came, they started to talk and sharing. We had lunch together, communicating and working together. That's what I want to see. So she can teach me and I can teach her.

## Discussion

Our interviews with the school personnel and pre-service teachers revealed a number of implications for sending pre-service teachers to remote communities for placement experiences in relation to the preparedness to work with Indigenous students and communities in the literacy space. A number of important themes emerged that can inform both universities and schools about what they might do better. Whilst it was clear that preparing students before they embark on their placement was paramount, it was also evident that schools can take steps to support the pre-service teachers.

## ***What Literacy?***

Most of the pre-service teachers who embarked on this placement had only completed one of their two compulsory units on literacy and three said that due to the nature of the degree they were enrolled in, they only were required to complete one literacy unit. Overwhelmingly, they said they needed more. Pre-service teachers and school personnel alike mentioned general and specific knowledge about teaching literacy, much of which related to the need to know much more about how to teach early reading and writing.

## **English as an Additional Language/Dialect**

In keeping with the recommendations of the review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (Wilson 2014), the majority of the pre-service teachers and school personnel interviewed spoke of the importance of including content about teaching EAL/D students. The pre-service teachers interviewed voiced their frustrations at not knowing how to make themselves understood by students and they felt that it could have benefitted if they were cognisant of effective EAL/D strategies for working with these students.

## **Scaffolding and Differentiating Learning**

In the interviews the teachers and principals mentioned the importance of pre-service teachers being able to scaffold students' learning and for them to be able to differentiate their teaching. This was highlighted as an important characteristic of teachers in these schools due to the wide-ranging abilities that are often found in each classroom and in one school because of their use of AL which has scaffolding as one of its key principles.

## **Knowledge About Literacy Programs**

Teachers and the pre-service teachers agreed that it would be beneficial for the pre-service teachers to know more about the whole-school approaches used in the respective schools. However, this does raise a number of issues. First, there are practical barriers to investing a lot of effort and time in training university students in specific programs, as history shows that jurisdictions are immensely fickle in their adoption of programs, and there is no guarantee of how "long" any particular approach will be used in a school or jurisdiction. Second, it is important that pre-service teachers understand the underlying philosophies that drive specific programs in order for them to make any informed judgements about the efficacy of a program. The data reported here highlighted that the pre-service teachers often

reflected on the theoretical ideas they had explored in their university classes in order to try and connect to and understand and make sense of the literacy programs used by their respective schools. Third, it is almost impossible for students to learn how to teach in a program in a short three-week placement when experienced teachers require hours of professional development to be able to understand and implement a program themselves. Finally, all of this presents another set of issues for pre-service teachers undertaking practicum in these schools. Pre-service teachers are required to demonstrate competency with respect to professional set of standards (AITSL), many of which relate to literacy. In the AL school a number of the pre-service teachers were not afforded the opportunity to teach the literacy lessons and so found it difficult to address these standards. Further in the DI school the pre-service teachers were given little autonomy over the way they planned and implemented their learning experiences, which also made it difficult for them to address many of these standards.

### *Cultural Competence, Communicating on Community*

Another strong theme that emerged from the data was the need for pre-service teachers to have a level of cultural competence and an ability to communicate in effective ways whilst in community. Pre-service teachers and school personnel talked about the importance of being able to “stand back” and not being intrusive. The importance of building and developing relationships was also discussed as being pivotal for effective teaching and learning in schools with school personnel and the pre-service teachers alike frequently making reference to this throughout the interviews.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this study similarly suggest there is an urgent need for specific content to be included in Initial Teacher Education if we are to adequately prepare pre-service teachers to work in these communities. The data from the interviews clearly showed the need for pre-service teachers to have more literacy in their respective courses due to the focus on literacy teaching in remote schools. In particular, pre-service teachers who undertake professional experience in remote schools need to be provided with course content that focuses explicitly on working with EAL/D students. It would also be useful to consider the various whole-school programs that might be used by schools and at the very least provide students with some background information relating to those programs. Whilst it would not be feasible to know all there is to know about the programs, at the very least we should help them to unpack/critique the programs in relation to what they have learned about effective language and literacy pedagogies for students from diverse linguistic and cultural

backgrounds, for example, helping them to understand how and why scaffolding is integral to AL pedagogy. This would provide them with a much more informed base to reflect on literacy programs offered in schools. Schools on the other hand need to be much more willing to allow students to teach into these programs, as observing a program can be very different from actually teaching in a program. This is also important in relation to students fulfilling their requirements to show evidence of meeting the professional standards for teaching. The data also suggests that schools need to be more open to reflective dialogue about the literacy programs and teaching in schools. Finally and most importantly, it is clear that doing work in cultural competence, communicating on community and building relationships are of paramount importance when considering preparing pre-service teachers to undertake this work.

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