

# Australian Teacher Education Association

## Annual Conference Proceedings Archive



**Please cite this paper as:**

Auld, G., Charles, C., Dyer, J., Levy, G. & Marshall, A. (2013). *Knowledge making by pre-service teachers on a professional placement experience in a remote Australian indigenous community*. Refereed paper presented at 'Knowledge makers and notice takers: Teacher education research impacting policy and practice', the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Brisbane, 30 June–3 July.

**Published by:** Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA)

**Available via stable URL:** [https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013\\_auld\\_charles\\_dyer\\_levy\\_and\\_marshall.pdf](https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013_auld_charles_dyer_levy_and_marshall.pdf)

**Review status:** Refereed—abstract and full paper blind peer-reviewed

**Peer-review refereeing process:** The conference committee for the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA) facilitates the review of all papers for admission to the conference. Abstracts for all papers presented are reviewed by the organising committee as to suitability for presentation as research at the annual conference, but full paper refereeing is optional. Only full, peer-reviewed papers actually presented at the conference are published on the ATEA website.

Refereed papers were subject to a thorough and anonymous peer review process that involved a blind review of the research publication in its entirety by independent qualified experts from the field of teacher education. Provisionally accepted papers were returned to the author/s for revision before inclusion in the conference proceedings. The refereeing system was administered by the ATEA Conference Convenor and committee. The results of the peer review process are reported directly to the authors and recorded by the Conference Convenor.

The ATEA Conference Proceedings Archive listing on our website is the ultimate authority on which papers were refereed.

© Australian Teacher Education Association, 2013. Although copyright of papers published in the annual conference proceedings is held by ATEA, authors retain the right to rework their papers for publication in other venues. Where a paper is to be reproduced in its entirety, permission should be sought from the ATEA Executive.

# **Knowledge making by Pre-service teachers on a professional placement experience in a remote Australian Indigenous Community**

**Glenn Auld, Claire Charles, Julie Dyer, Gary Levy, Alan Marshall**  
**Deakin University**

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the preliminary investigations of an emerging program of research in which the authors are engaged. The program aims to generate new understandings for effective teacher education around the notion of ‘building belonging’ of non-Indigenous teachers in remote Indigenous schools and communities in Australia. This preliminary investigation sought to explore the potential impact of a professional placement in a remote Indigenous community on the developing professional practice of non-Indigenous pre-service teachers (PSTs). Twelve participants were interviewed while on three-week professional learning placements around Katherine and in Maningrida in the Northern Territory during 2012. Existing literature reporting on the experiences of largely white, middle class PSTs in unfamiliar cultural contexts draws attention to themes of disruption, and the potential for meaningful and transformative professional learning experiences in such contexts (eg Gannon, 2010; Marble, 2012; Phillips, 2011; Ryan & Healy, 2009). Drawing on some of these insights, our preliminary reading of the data reveal the variety of ways and differing extents to which participants experienced disruptive, or potentially transformative professional learning moments. We conclude the paper by pointing towards some key areas for further investigation, in order to progress our research program around building belonging between PSTs and remote Indigenous communities.

## **Introduction and background**

Increasing mobility of teachers, internationalisation policies in higher education and a globalised knowledge economy is shaping teacher education courses in Australia in distinctive ways. These trends translate into opportunities for PSTs to undertake professional learning placements beyond their local community in overseas and interstate locations. With the Australian curriculum now citing a cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Peoples, there is a heightened debate between policy makers and practitioners about how this can be delivered in all Australian schools. One prerequisite for this priority is the knowledge, skills and experiences of teachers and pre-service teachers’ education. This paper reports on the experiences of non-Indigenous PSTs who undertook a professional learning placement in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in 2012. The placement was offered as part of Deakin University’s Northern Territory Global Experience Program (NTGEP). We explore the potential impact of this professional placement on the developing professional practice of the non-Indigenous PSTs, in terms of whether the experience allowed them to disrupt and transform their understandings of history, culture, race, curriculum and knowledge.

The notion of border crossing has a number of powerful resonances in relation to students undertaking professional learning in less common settings (Parr, 2012). Along with the shifting and indefinite borders between novice and experienced teachers, the students participating in the program had to negotiate geo-spatial, cultural, and racial borders that took them well beyond the more typical boundaries operating for students placed on practicums within an hour or so of their place of residence, either in metropolitan Melbourne, or its outer fringes. Theorising the concept of border crossing using the understandings of Giroux (2006),

Marble (2012) and Michie (2011) position the work of teacher educators as taking PSTs from familiar to unfamiliar spaces that are geo-spatially, culturally, environmentally and interpersonally different. Travel can increase knowledge, challenge stereotypes, and build resonances with and across their existing culture and identity. Essentially the goal of border crossing is to be transformative. New and different possibilities can be realised when PSTs engage with new discourses, as they uncomfortably negotiate ways of being and teaching in these new sites of learning.

Several potential layers of disruption come into play when non-Indigenous PSTs engage in such border crossings. In the context of pre-service teacher training, Marble (2012) claimed that the “critical goal” is “not to simplify the experience of those learning to teach, but to complicate their experience to the point where they are forced to think, forced to encounter the Other in ways that shock thought and disrupt habits” (p. 29). This line of thought is supported in research by Phillips (2011) who, in teaching Indigenous studies to non-Indigenous PSTs within the academy, argued that, “disruption to students’ framework for knowing self and other” (p. 270) was the key to developing transformational experiences for the students.

While curriculum policy requires Australian school children to be conversant with the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples, professional learning placements in Indigenous contexts where students engage in border crossings may initiate deep questioning for PSTs about race, culture, history, curriculum and knowledge. This professional learning placement, however, is complex and does not follow a linear path for all students. One key issue we identify is the complex extent to which PSTs appeared to be experiencing disruption that may be transformative for their understandings of race, culture, history, curriculum and knowledge. Learning to teach is characterised by different layers and levels of consciousness in the PSTs in relation to these issues as evidenced by a preliminary analysis of the data.

### **Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups provided the sources of data for this research. For the purposes of this paper we drew from the interview data because the focus groups occurred after the placement. The following questions guided our inquiry: What is the impact of a professional learning placement in a remote Indigenous community on non-Indigenous PSTs’ professional learning? How might this experience influence challenge and shape PSTs? The PSTs spent three or five weeks on placement in one of two remote communities in the Northern Territory. There were 12 PSTs participating in the study. There was a spread of students across year levels and courses. Students in undergraduate courses were on placement for three weeks, whilst the Master of Teaching students were on placement for five weeks. The study was conducted in 2012.

We used a semi-structured interview in this study in an attempt to identify the dimensions affecting disruption to the students’ practices. Using this method ‘the researcher tries to have participants use their own words, not those predefined by the researcher to discuss the topics’ (Yin, 2011, p. 135). The interviews were conducted in the remote communities during the placement experience but outside of the normal teaching hours of the pre-service students. Consideration was given to the participant’s demanding workload during this placement experience. The lecturer who was not in a power relationship with the participants carried out the interviews (ie they had no power to regulate or assess these students’ work). The

interviews were usually conducted outside the rooms in which participants were staying, and some were conducted while travelling in vehicles from one location to another.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The research team read the transcripts and met to discuss themes that emerged from our initial reading of the data. Five researchers then coded the transcripts for categories of disruption to their (1) border crossing experiences (2) identity and (3) curriculum and learning.

### **Race and culture**

Theorising race and culture for non-indigenous white young PSTs in contemporary Australia necessitates an engagement with the neoliberal context in which young people are growing up in western countries. Neoliberalism is a form of government that positions people as individuals who must engage in self-regulation and self-monitoring in order to make decisions that will best enable them to live productive lives for which they are constructed as individually responsible. As O’Flynn and Petersen (2007) argue, neoliberalism encourages people to understand themselves as enterprising subjects who can construct themselves in terms of value and productivity. Experience can be seen as a commodity in this context, as people are encouraged to become the “shape shifting portfolio people” (Gee, 2004: 105) that advanced capitalist economies require. Gee (2004: 105) suggests that young people today are encouraged to “think and act, from quite early in life, in terms of their resume” and he argues that class privileged young people, in particular, seek and understand experiences in these terms. These incentives to be a particular kind of person in contemporary western society are inextricably classed and raced (Gill & Scharff, 2011), and thus they are part of how class privilege and whiteness are constituted.

Neoliberal discourses came to the fore on several occasions as non-Indigenous PSTs talked about their motivations for undertaking a placement in a remote indigenous community. As Katrina suggested:

*I’m only 20 so I pretty much haven’t had very much life experience at all so I think I need to make a conscious effort for myself to go out and get those experiences.*

Here Katrina utilises a discourse of enterprising self-responsibility, constructing herself as an individual responsible for ‘getting’ certain ‘experiences’ that may help her become a better teacher.

*I kind of feel that I’m not very culturally aware and I really wanted to have an experience that if I’m going to be teaching that, that I wanted to know.*

Other students drew upon more clearly enterprising, even mercenary, discourses in describing their motivations for undertaking the NTGEP. Carla, for example, suggested that:

*I’ve just always been a country girl at heart and have got a soft spot but the city is just a bit too busy for my lifestyle and that’s probably what attracted me to come here and I heard the money was good.*

Here Carla constructs ‘lifestyle’ in terms of something that she can choose and manage. She implies that there are choices to be made in order to construct the lifestyle you may wish for. Carla’s last reason for undertaking teaching in remote communities was taken up by another student, Richard, who commented on three stereotypes of non-Indigenous teachers in remote

communities that he had heard about since being in the Northern Territory: missionaries, mercenaries and misfits:

*So missionaries are trying to save the world. Mercenaries are here because you get a remote bonus on pay and 6 months holiday. And misfits who just can't get work elsewhere. And there are some at this school. There's one teacher who kind of pulled me aside, said if you want to make money this is where you've got to teach. And there's a few who are close to retirement and are here to save for retirement.*

Such ways of positioning themselves can be understood as part of how these PSTs constitute themselves as non-Indigenous in relation to an Indigenous 'other'. Simply by constructing themselves as choosing individuals who can make decisions that will help them carve out a particular 'lifestyle', these young people constitute themselves through neoliberal discourses that are linked with class privilege and whiteness. Furthermore, many construct the Indigenous students and families in the communities in which they are placed *in relation* to the white middle class norms with which they are familiar, through what they happen to notice about these communities. Richard, for example, observes that:

*...after lunch a lot of kids don't come back because they're had their lunch and they go home. The shop is only 2 minutes outside the fence so the kids go buy chips and 2 litre bottles of Coke.*

By noticing these things and constructing them as 'different' or noteworthy, Richard silently implies his own location within normative discourses about health and personal responsibility in neoliberal times.

Despite these moments where particular forms of class and whiteness are reinscribed in PSTs' comments, a number of the PSTs did appear to undergo disruptive experiences that worked to bring questions of race, culture and history to the fore in potentially transformative ways. Ladson Billings (2006) calls on teacher educators to devise experiences to enable PSTs to see themselves as "cultural beings" (p.109). This is important for PSTs to critique and recognise their own cultural systems so that they can in turn recognise their students' culture. The NTGEP responds to this call as a border crossing experience by moving PSTs into an unfamiliar setting that has the power to disrupt established and preferred senses of identity, as well as realisations of assumed behaviours that can become temporarily disturbed in this new setting.

Terri recalls, there is an immediate noticing of difference in Indigenous students:

*Sue has [water in] her eyes, and oh Sue you're crying, you're crying miss, like they'll just say those things. Whereas kids from western culture wouldn't dare to say anything like that.*

Immediately Terri notices differences in the power relationship between students and teachers. In the western culture there is a distance between teacher and student especially if emotions are displayed in front of students. There is a reserve and a boundary that is not crossed by students in western culture. However for Indigenous students there is a care and concern for the teacher that recognises less of a power- and more of an equal relationship, opening up unknown possibilities for the student teacher relationship. The border becomes

enabling for Terri to notice a difference and one that is non-judgemental about right or wrong ways of being and becoming a teacher.

### **History**

Another powerful way in which border crossing seemed to challenge PSTs was in relation to history. After visiting the site of the Wave Hill Walk Off, Jenny commented:

*Why aren't we teaching about Australia. When we went to Wave Hill walk off, like why don't I know about that. Why am I learning about that now. I don't understand why I don't know.*

A border crossing into the curriculum now becomes political, with inclusions and exclusions at their own education shortcomings, and a realisation of the inadequacy of their own education. This is a heartfelt response to her own education, as this complicates her previously held view of her own education, now seeing its inadequacy in equipping her for such an experience. The power of the curriculum is played out here as she realises that deficiency is an important event in Australia's history. With seeming disbelief that this event could have slipped through her education, in this process she is critiquing her own education shortcoming.

Another pre-service teacher, Mary, identified the silences of the local history associated with the community in which she was teaching:

*We learn so much British and Asian history... I mean this is what happened in our country that we don't know much about and we're not ever going to know about because a lot of it's secret but I don't know it just intrigues me.*

This indicates beginning understandings of how history is socially constructed and how there is closed and open knowledge systems in the place where she is undertaking professional experience. It would appear the pre-service teacher is keen to provide her future students with another take on the dominant historical discourse to privilege an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective in her teaching.

Whilst the PSTs have not crossed geographical national borders, they have crossed into differences of community, poverty, justice, culture and relationships as they encounter the visible and invisible, and their own past. The disruptive impact of 'not knowing' about the land right is experienced at Wave Hill where the power of place and historical event becomes a source of reflection on her own learning about Australian history and wonder at its omission. This impact represents an encounter with history and the relevance of this place in Australia's history is revealed and then questioned. Such questioning realises the value of place-based experiences and provides an opportunity for transformative learning. This questioning has reflected on the inadequacy of Mary's own schooling, the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history to the present day, and the shortcomings of curriculum. Such a moment represents the transformative potential of disruptive, different, place-based experiences.

### **Curriculum and knowledge**

The critique of standards-based testing was a key way in which curriculum was challenged by the PSTs' experiences during this professional placement. Although powerless to change this

systemic practice, John questioned the logic behind NAPLAN testing when the students might bring a different set of practices to such testing.

*for NAPLAN one of the questions which the children were marked incorrectly on but it was like to order a sequence of events and the kids said that they wake up, go to school and then eat breakfast because that's what they do here, and they were... that was wrong.*

John is identifying the cultural relevance of standardised testing in the example he outlined above. He could identify that the tests are designed from a particular cultural context that might not be relevant to some students in his class.

The opportunity to reflect on their practice with in-service and PSTs outside of the school day was valued by the PSTs. As Elizabeth mentioned:

*A lot of my learning came from living with the principal and his partner and talking to all other student teachers.*

The PSTs are learning about the collaborative nature of the profession and how such conversations about reflection on practice are useful as part of their professional learning. The dialogical nature of learning and teaching is summed up by Lindsey who suggested:

*I'm not just here to give, I'm here to learn and to broaden my experience and horizons and yeah like it's not just about me giving back, it's about me growing and learning as well.*

Such an approach has strong links to both ways education (Harris, 1990) where students are learning mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge as an integral part of the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

While still only a pilot project, there are strong indications that the disruptive potential (and actual experiences) of white, middle class PSTs undertaking placements in remote Indigenous communities challenges real and pre-existing biases, assumptions and discourses that these PSTs take to their 'other' destinations. The inter-related fields of border crossing, identity, and curriculum and learning reveal ways in which the placement experience generates provocations and disturbances to established ways of being and operating in the world.

Predominant values, discourses and preconceptions become temporarily destabilised when PSTs immerse themselves in unfamiliar and differently ordered temporal and spatial zones. For some PSTs, these disruptive experiences necessitate a reaffirmation of existing paradigms while for others; the experiences are taken as opportunities to open themselves to transformational encounters. These encounters produce edges of new growth that come out of some critical inquiry into personal and shared histories and trajectories.

Further work on this project seeks to explore the subtleties, ambiguities and substance of disruptive experiences in this context, including the nature and consequences of the reverse culture shock that affects some students on their return home. It is anticipated that further immersion in the existing data will yield findings that can be incorporated into the ongoing development of the Northern Territory Global Experience Program, as well as generating insights of theoretical and discursive interest.

## References

- Gannon, S. (2010). Service learning as a third space in pre-service teacher education. *Issues in Educational Research*, 20(1 (Special Edition on service learning)), 21-28.
- Gee, J. (2004). *Situated language and learning: a critique of traditional schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Gill and Scharff (2011) (Eds). *New femininities: postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giroux, H. (2006). *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Harris, S. (1990) *Two-way Aboriginal schooling: education and cultural survival*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 104-109. doi: 10.1525/aeq.2006.37.2.104
- Marble, S. (2012). Becoming-teacher: Encounters with the Other in teacher education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 33(1), 21-31. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2012.632158>
- O'Flynn, G., & Petersen, E. B. (2007). 'The good life' and 'the rich portfolio': young women, schooling and neoliberal subjectification. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(4), 459-472.
- Parr, G. (2012). Leading an international teaching practicum: negotiating tensions in a site of border pedagogy. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 97-109. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2012.669824>
- Phillips, D. J. M. (2011). *Resisting contradictions: Non-Indigenous pre-service teacher responses to critical Indigenous studies*. (PhD), Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Education. Retrieved from [http://eprints.qut.edu.au/46071/1/Donna\\_Phillips\\_Thesis.pdf](http://eprints.qut.edu.au/46071/1/Donna_Phillips_Thesis.pdf)
- Ryan, M., & Healy, A. (2009). It's not all about school: Ways of disrupting pre-service teachers' perceptions of pedagogy and curriculum. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(3), 424-429. doi: 10.1177/0022487107305259
- Yin, Robert K. (2011). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. New York: The Guilford Press.