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## **Impacting practice: The undergraduate teacher and the Aboriginal student**

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### *Abstract*

The purpose of this research was to explore through the lens of pre-service teachers, factors that impact on Aboriginal students' learning and engagement. This paper explores how pre-service teachers were able to understand, engage with and respond to Aboriginal students in a field-site reading program. Critical aspects of program success, such as cultural knowledge and engagement highlighted by Burridge and Chodkiewicz (2012), were investigated.

Twenty-four second year pre-service teachers from a regional Australian university were matched in one-on-one teaching dyads with Aboriginal students from Kindergarten to Year 6. The reading program, which ran for one-hour sessions two afternoons each week for five weeks, was conducted as an after-school program 'on their turf' at a local Aboriginal housing estate.

Each week, group cultural debrief sessions were conducted by an on-site Elder and gatekeepers to help pre-service teachers reflect on their engagement with students. Weekly on-campus focus group discussions with pre-service teachers were led by the principal investigator and reviewed pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning.

Data, based on a qualitative case study approach, were obtained from a semi-structured 13-item questionnaire completed by the pre-service teachers at the end of the program. This was triangulated against data collected by the principal investigator from informal observations of the pre-service teachers and from semi-formal interviews with the Elder and gatekeepers. Major themes distilled from the analysis of the findings include: cultural connections, developing cross-cultural relationships with Aboriginal children and culturally-appropriate engagement. The findings have implications for teacher education programs across Australia as they shed further light on culturally-appropriate pedagogical practices that impact on teacher education.

*Keywords:* cultural knowledge; cultural connections; cross-cultural relationships; culturally-appropriate engagement; engaging Aboriginal students

### *Introduction*

In 1982, the New South Wales Department of Education listed as one of its main priorities the need to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students to levels comparable to

mainstream Australian students (Aboriginal Education Policy, 1982). Over thirty years later, these differences in levels of educational achievement still exist. Research by Rowe (2003) and What Works: The work program (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2009) identified the critical role of the teacher in making a difference to the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students.

To achieve these outcomes, teachers need to connect with local Aboriginal communities in order to incorporate into their pedagogy an understanding of Aboriginal cultures and ways of knowing and learning. This knowledge is dependent on developing reciprocal relationships with community that are built on strong foundations of respect, empathy and shared world views, as identified by What Works: The work program (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2009). Strong, positive relationships together with teacher interest in the well-being of the students, strengthens the teaching learning situation. Good relationships, therefore, are fundamental to making the connections with students and their community, helping to promote the educational achievement of Aboriginal students.

The ability of University undergraduate teacher education programs to produce teachers who are empowered to work with Aboriginal students in culturally respectful ways has been problematic for some time, as identified by the Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA, 2010) report. The research that is the focus of this paper used a field-site placement program to explore pre-service teachers' developing understandings of Aboriginal students and their learning in the context of a reading program implemented in partnership with a local Aboriginal community.

The literature review in the next part of this paper is followed by a description of the methods employed in this case study, which explored pre-service teachers' understanding, engagement with and response to teaching Aboriginal students. Following the presentation of the results of the study, the findings are discussed in terms of recommendations applicable to pre-service teacher education.

### *Literature Review*

Fundamental to the development of good cultural connections between schools and local Aboriginal communities is knowledge and understanding of protocols for engagement. These protocols provide a safe and accepted way of establishing partnerships that are based on respect and integrity (Board of Studies NSW, 2008). It is important to respect the position of Elders and gatekeepers in Aboriginal communities who are the points of contact with that community. Pre-service teachers need to be supported and scaffolded when Universities initiate partnerships with Aboriginal communities not only so that they gain access to those communities but more importantly so that they can develop genuine cultural connections and partnerships that work for the mutual benefit of the Aboriginal students and ultimately their communities.

Another advantage of teachers making close cultural connections with the local Aboriginal community is that it helps them to develop an understanding of the culture of the children with whom they are working, which is important for building cross-cultural relationships and mutual respect. Aboriginal groups aim to survive as distinctive social and cultural entities (Reconciliation Australia, 2010) that are best understood through either engaging in personal contact or through inter-cultural dialogue. This understanding then enables teachers to work from a relationship-based pedagogy and to engage students in culturally-responsive ways that Savage, Hindle, Meyer, Hynds, Penetito and Sleeter (2011) argue is integral to a strengths-based model of engagement. Coming from this position is important because it is the relationships between teachers and Aboriginal students that play such a critical role in day-to-day interactions with Aboriginal students and impacts on their futures (Frigo, Corrigan, Adams, Hughes, Stephens & Wood, 2004).

Teacher preparation forms a critical part in the ability of future teachers to understand and work effectively with Aboriginal students, their families and their communities. Supported intercultural educational field-site experiences for pre-service teachers are, according to Garmon (2004) a means by which cultural understanding can be developed. These culturally-appropriate engagement experiences can provide spaces for pre-service teachers to re-examine their own perceptions and understandings in light of their own and others' world views.

Teachers not only need to create partnerships between schools and communities but to present curriculum, teaching and education programs that are challenging as well as culturally appropriate (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2008). Cultures vary at both macro and micro levels and what is culturally appropriate engagement for students from one community may not necessarily be culturally appropriate for students from another community. It therefore needs to be recognised that knowledge about Aboriginal communities is situational (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2008) and it is the gaining of this knowledge about what is culturally appropriate in terms of engagement that Burrige and Chodkiewicz (2012) justifiably considered vital for the success of education programs. Responses from community and students will in part be determined by the degree to which parents and students feel that their culture is valued and their needs are being met. Perceptions of knowledge held by middle-class Anglo-Saxon teachers may also be problematic when information about Aborigines is constructed in their absence and their voice is silent, as was done in the past. Issues around cultural connections, cross-cultural relationships and culturally appropriate engagement are important and complex considerations for all teachers when working with Aboriginal students and their communities. It seems logical that responsibility for ensuring that teachers understand the factors that impact on Aboriginal students' learning and understanding needs to begin at the pre-service teacher education level.

### *Methods*

The Working with Children in a Homework Centre Project was a partnership between a campus of a regional Australian University and a local Aboriginal community. The central focus of the project was to enable pre-service teachers to use culturally appropriate protocols as they delivered one-on-one Reading lessons to Aboriginal students in the community. The project was linked to an Inclusive Education subject taught to second year pre-service teachers, which focused on diverse learners.

At the beginning of the semester in which the subject was taught and as a condition of the project, the gatekeepers of the Aboriginal community provided training in cultural protocols to the pre-service teachers. These protocols were reviewed by the lecturer prior to each field visit and actively reinforced by the gatekeeper and Elder at the field-site. The one-hour after-school field-site visits, which occurred over an 8 week period, provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage with these cultural practices while developing relationships with the Aboriginal students, their families and caregivers.

A number of consultations with community Elders and stakeholders resulted in the selection of the project site, Andra House (pseudonym), as it offered a naturalistic informal setting that was on the 'community's turf'. The site, which was independent of institutional history, provided opportunities for breaking down cultural barriers and developing relationships between the pre-service teachers and the Aboriginal families. Choice of location is also important because community members can often feel alienated from school settings (Muller, 2012).

The participants in the project were the Elder, gatekeepers, Aboriginal students, parents and caregivers from the community as well as pre-service teachers and the lecturer. The Elder acted as the main gatekeeper and provided permission for the project to be delivered at the Andra House site. The gatekeepers secured access to the families and students, and took care of the necessary day to day links between the pre-service teachers and the students. Aboriginal students, selected on the basis of non-probability convenience sampling, ranged in age from 5 years (Kindergarten) to 12 years (Year 6). There was a fairly even proportion of boys and girls. Parents and caregivers were supported by the Elder and gatekeepers to observe and interact with the reading dyads.

The lecturer, who had dual roles as principal researcher and project participant, supported the pre-service teachers in the academic delivery of the reading program. She also modelled proactive ways to engage with the Aboriginal students and community through supportive oral and written communication. The Elder and gatekeepers scaffolded the pre-service teachers' engagement with community, nurturing their development and understanding of Aboriginal culture, practices, beliefs and values. The 24 pre-service teachers represented a whole year cohort and ranged in age from school leavers to mature age students.

This qualitative study was based on a single case study approach. The pre-service teachers completed a semi-structured 13-item questionnaire at the conclusion of the project. The questionnaire explored factors that impacted on pre-service teachers' abilities to understand

the Aboriginal child as well as their capacity to engage with and respond to Aboriginal student's learning. This data was triangulated against informal observations of pre-service teachers by the principal investigator together with data from semi-formal interviews with the Elder and gatekeepers. These different sources of data and methods of data collection provided internal validation of pre-service teachers' responses. Triangulation was seen as an important process to counterbalance the inherent bias of respondents.

## *Results*

The results of this study were distilled from data that explored pre-service teachers' understanding of factors that impact on Aboriginal students' learning and engagement. Three major themes emerged. These were: cultural connections; developing cross-cultural relationships with Aboriginal students, parents and caregivers; and culturally-appropriate engagement. Pseudonyms have been used in the presentation of the results to respect the privacy of the respondents.

### *Cultural connections*

The survey responses from the pre-service teachers indicated how connections with Aboriginal communities developed and changed over the period of the project. For example, Linda said, "I have grown to embrace the Indigenous culture more openly than before with a broader understanding of their needs and how they learn." She commented further that "A broader perspective of cultures has allowed me to grow as a professional." Francesca went from recognising that "I didn't know what to expect, but I learned a lot about working with Aboriginal students and communities" to then stating "My understanding has changed dramatically." She extended this comment further by acknowledging that despite her own Aboriginal background she still wanted to learn more. She concluded, "I was able to see how events in history have impact on Aboriginal families."

The Elder and gatekeepers also highlighted cultural connections, noting that more support needed to be provided to the pre-service teachers so that they come into the community with "greater appreciation and understanding of how this culture works." The gatekeeper also stated that as the pre-service teachers had not been "touched" by the school system, they would not have the prejudices and pre-conceived ideas of the mainstream teachers. The Elder and gatekeepers drew attention to relationships, noting the importance of cross-cultural connections in the comment from a parent, 'I know my child will learn with this teacher.'

### *Cross-cultural relationships*

The pre-service teachers' responses indicated how relationships with the Aboriginal students, parents and caregivers developed over the time that the project was implemented. All of the pre-service teachers talked about how their one-on-one relationships developed with their students. For example, Freda emphasised how "developing a one-on-one relationship" with

her student “was very practical” as “I will be required to develop relationships with all of my students.” Linda also emphasised the positive aspects of the dyad structure saying that she “really enjoyed the one-to-one interaction.” Reflecting at the end of the program, Ken concluded, “I now have more empathy for a child’s personal circumstances than I did before.”

Over the period of the programme, the relationships from the perspectives of the pre-service teachers extended beyond the children whom they were teaching as evidenced in Freda’s comment, “Both my student and her mother are now familiar with me. I am pleased that we have developed a positive rapport.” Mark’s response, “I have learn’t[sic] to be persistent and understanding of the student, his family and his background” reflects a common thread in student responses. The Elder and gatekeepers in commenting on cross-cultural relationships noted that pre-service teachers needed to meet with the parents prior to the program so that there was some familiarisation process in place.

### *Culturally-appropriate engagement*

In responding to questions about culturally appropriate engagement, Grace noted that she developed “confidence in working with different people.” She also noted her developing interest “in different perspectives/understandings and experiences of life.” She then went on to comment that she was able to gain “a better understanding of issues/variables which affect the learning and academic development of low socio-economic students/communities.” Lucy, when commenting on a question about understanding community reiterated Jake’s comment, “The field site helped shape my values and attitudes as a professional”. Barbara referred to the rapport that she developed with the parent of the student with whom she was working. She also noted that “The parent has grown a lot of respect for me and all of us” and we “have formed a great rapport.”

Observations by the principal researcher noted the need for pre-service teachers to be aware of cultural protocols when engaging with parents. Parents felt uncomfortable if pre-service teachers asked questions too quickly following initial greetings. The gatekeepers, commenting on culturally appropriate engagement, noted that positive feedback provided by the pre-service teachers on the students’ reading was well-received by the parents who commented that they “only hear from the school when something is wrong”. The gatekeepers noted that the positive feedback from the pre-service teachers moved the parents towards being “more involved” with their children. The gatekeepers were surprised that the pre-service teachers were able to maintain student attendance, referring to this as a positive affirmation of the students’ engagement with the program.

### *Conclusions and Implications for Pre-service Teacher Education*

The preparation of pre-service teachers for their first experiences in working with Aboriginal students in their communities was the key driver in this research project. The training in

cultural protocols that the pre-service teachers received from the gatekeepers before the field-site visits commenced was important but not sufficient on its own to prepare the pre-service teachers fully for the complex set of experiences that they were to encounter. These findings emphasise the need for multiple, ongoing scaffolded experiences over time with care taken in the preparation and enactment of each experience. This approach addresses Garmon's (2004) concerns that field sites in themselves are not necessarily educative and may reinforce existing perceptions and prejudices that are culturally inappropriate. It is further argued in the present study that the presence of the Elder, gatekeepers and principal investigator was a necessary mediating factor in the development of inter-cultural respect and relationship building, particularly prior to and during the field experience.

The pre-service teachers involved in this study learned through experience and the guidance of the Elder and gatekeepers the importance of following protocols necessary for establishing relationships at the field-site. It is expected that, because of these experiences, the pre-service teachers will remember these protocols when engaging with parents. For example, they may remember the importance of spending time talking with parents before asking them questions about their children's progress. The implementation of protocols helps to empower pre-service teachers to work with Aboriginal students and their parents in ways that are culturally respectful, an area that the MCEECDYA (2010) report identified as being a persistent problem. The Board of Studies NSW (2008) guidelines highlight the necessity of protocols for promoting safe and acceptable ways of developing cross-cultural partnerships. This study also found that the gentle insistence by the gatekeepers that pre-service teachers be introduced to the protocols prior to the field-site visits and be scaffolded and supported on site were just as important. The results of this study therefore reiterate the critical place of protocols for Indigenous communities and the need for pre-service teachers to know and apply such culturally appropriate protocols essential for developing effective relationships.

The comments from the pre-service teachers clearly showed how their understanding of Aboriginal protocols and culture deepened over the period of the visits. This was evidenced through the ways that mutual respect and cross-cultural relationships developed between the pre-service teachers and the Elder, gatekeepers, parents and students. These comments from the pre-service teachers highlight the importance of strength-based pedagogy that is articulated in the work of Savage et al. (2011), providing the foundation for the development of cross-cultural relationships.

This study has implications for pre-service teacher education courses. In particular, the findings illustrate the importance of multiple scaffolded field experiences over time and the critical role of Elders. It is imperative that such experiences are not just complementary to on-campus classes but should be an integral part of preparing pre-service teachers to work in rural, regional and remote parts of Australia.

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