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## **A MODEL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS IN A REMOTE AREA OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

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The purpose of this article is to describe the shortcomings of the preparation of teachers who are appointed to remote schools within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands district of Western Australia. The article also suggests a model for the development for teachers who are appointed to the region that will address the shortcomings.

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands is a geographically isolated area east of Perth (Western Australia) and in the central desert region of Australia (see Map One). It is devoid of any large centres of population and communities are small, isolated and made up almost entirely of traditional-living Ngaanyatjarra speaking Aboriginal people.

Map 1

Ngaanyatjarra Lands

Scale (kilometres)

Within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands there are ten schools which are located in the communities that have reasonably stable populations. The schools serve students with ages ranging from about 4 to 16 years. Information collected from staff profiles (1980-1995), teacher surveys (1992-1994) and anecdotal records (made during my nine years of service in the area between 1978 and 1994), highlight a number of characteristics of teachers who have worked in the Lands schools since they were established in the mid-1970s. In summary, teachers who have worked in the Lands have been:

- (a) In their first teaching appointment, or first promotional position for principals. For example, only one principal has ever come into the Lands holding a particular level of principal in a substantive capacity. All others have taken their positions as promotions. A further example is that, from 1991 to 1994, only 3 out of the 41 teachers in the Lands came with any teaching experience in government or non-government schools.
- (b) Young and non-Aboriginal.
- (c) Inexperienced in working with Aboriginal people and with little preservice training in preparation for their new position (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.190).
- (d) Keen to transfer as soon as possible (usually after two years) to a more favourable location, where 'favourable' is defined according to what is seen by the teacher as consistent with the nature of their pre-service training and the personal aspirations they hold.
- (e) Keen to work hard but possessing vague or inappropriate notions about Aboriginal students and the complexities of the job.

The impact of these characteristics is that schools have usually been staffed by non-Aboriginal teachers who, despite their enthusiasm and commitment, have found it difficult, at least in the first twelve months, to teach in a way where they can be confident that their students are producing high standards of learning (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.195). As one teacher put it (2 February 1993);

Getting started in teaching out here is like being in a car that is spinning its wheels, creating a lot of dust, making even more noise, but getting nowhere. You spend a lot of time attempting to discover how to teach effectively and, when you find some answers, your two years is up and you transfer out.

Similarly, one newly promoted principal described his early experiences in the Lands as being a process of, "moving from one crisis to another with teachers and a heap of children following behind".

It seems as though the history of teacher development in the Lands has been a cycle of personal and professional discovery, growth, and then movement to another school. That is, teachers have had to work through the process of handling significant problems and issues of survival in the school and have become increasingly effective over time. The process has had to start again, however, as the now experienced teachers leave and new ones arrive (Sherwood, 1982, p.119 and National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990, p.105).

An important weaknesses in the model of teacher development that has evolved within the Lands is that some teachers have not been able to work out their professional problems and frustrations and so have left the area with a low regard for their teaching skills as well as with negative attitudes towards Aboriginal students, particularly in regard to their ability to learn (Harris, 1990, p.16). The despair felt by teachers who are struggling to survive their introduction to the profession can impact significantly upon the tradition of teaching and learning that is emerging in particular schools and their communities. In other words, the result of having teachers in schools who do not *like* being where they are may diminish the value of schooling according to the perception of Aboriginal people and the wider community.

A further effect of the model of teacher growth that has developed in the Lands is that every two years sees the recommencement of the process of discovery and struggle in learning how to teach. Moreover, there are very few teachers left behind from the previous period who can share their knowledge. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of documentation of successful teaching methods that new arrivals can use. As a result, there is little sense of moving on from the gains of previous years and the learning outcomes of students are limited compared to what they might be if there was some tradition in the development of a knowledge and skill base in curriculum and pedagogy.

A final point that needs to be made in regard to the impact of teacher development in the Lands is that an increasing number of Aboriginal people have a sense that the students in their communities are not receiving a high quality service. They are aware that the teachers are inexperienced and lack the knowledge and skills that can be used to add value to students. They also observe that the teachers are not prepared to remain in their schools for long periods of time. Comment made to me on this matter by one Ngaanyatjarra man (4 June, 1992) is that;

At least in the mission days, the teachers stayed and taught us for a longer time than they do now. Sometimes now I can see a white feller walking around and I don't know who he is. Then someone says that he must be one of the teachers, but no one is really sure. Teachers should stay longer so we can get to know them properly and they can learn to teach the kids well.

As well as suffering from the effects of professional inexperience, newly appointed teachers must work through a number of personal dilemmas some of which are related to the resolution of domestic issues and some in regard to settling in to living in a cross cultural setting. The sort of domestic concerns that may arise for non-Aboriginal teachers generally result from having to live away from traditional support structures that may be found in family, church, and friends, as well as the inability to create a new network because of the isolation from colleagues in other schools. There are also occasions when the quality of housing in the Lands is a matter of concern. Accommodation problems range from dwellings being extremely cramped, such as with teachers living in 'dongers' (small transportable buildings), to the stresses that can arise as a result from having to constantly live in close quarters with another colleague (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.195). The closeness of the living circumstances for staff may cause a 'goldfish bowl' mentality to emerge as teachers face a number of problems primarily caused by the lack of privacy. As the type of living circumstances causes increasing stress as the year wears on, It is hardly surprising that fourth term (October to December) is referred to as the 'Mullungrumble season' in one Lands' school.

The absence of services and facilities normally taken for granted in large centres such as a wide range of shopping facilities, high quality water, and regular electricity supplies, also causes personal difficulties to arise that may affect the ability of a teacher to make an increasingly professional contribution to the life of the school. As an example of this, in the first half of 1994, teachers in one Lands' community had to drive 700kms to the nearest large centre on two occasions during a term for food shopping because the local store did not stock food of a satisfactory quality. The teachers commented to me (21 June, 1994) that "the school had to be put second to the need to buy food and be able to physically survive!"

The impact of living in a cross cultural setting in a remote location should not be underestimated because, as Glass (1990, p.5) states, moving into the Lands is similar to moving to another part of the world. That the schools happen to be located in Western

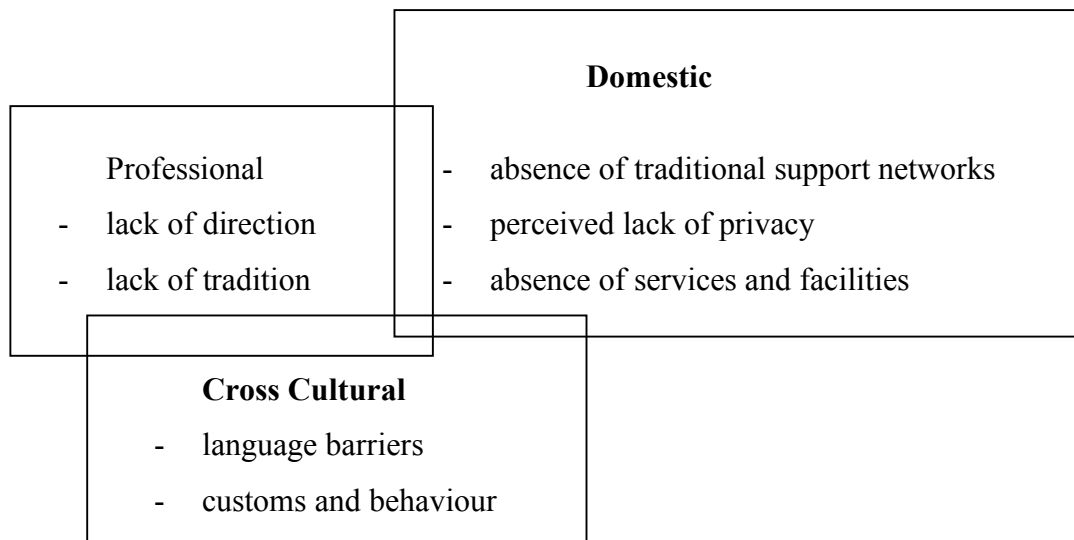
Australia is irrelevant when it is remembered that the main language, culture, religion, society and economy are quite foreign to non-Aboriginal traditions.

To summarise this discussion, there are three factors that impact heavily upon newly appointed teachers to schools within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. They may be categorised under the headings of; professional, domestic and cross cultural. The factors that affect a teacher's performance in schools within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands are shown in Figure One. They do not exist in isolation from each other.

Rather, what happens in one aspect of a teacher's life may impact upon what happens in another area.

**Figure 1**

Interaction of factors that may affect the performance of teachers in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands



A specific problem faced by a teacher in one area may affect the way in which issues in another area are perceived. As a result, specific problems faced by teachers can quickly escalate as factors related to other areas become involved and traditional decision-making methods through family and other support structures are lacking. An example of this is that, in one small Lands' community during 1992, a single male and a single female were required by the lack of accommodation, to live in the same house. Two people who would probably never have become friends but could still work professionally together were forced to live at close quarters. As the year went on, minor personal disagreements compounded to a point where there were frequent arguments at home and in the school in front of students as well as adults. The tension finally culminated with the female teacher assaulting the male teacher in a public place. Although this Incident stands as a dramatic event, my experience is that minor problems in, say, the domestic area can affect a teacher's performance in the other areas, and negative attitudes and feelings may develop to the extent that teachers find themselves simply trying to survive from term to term rather than look at ways to help the school develop.

As already mentioned, there are no traditional forms of mediation and counselling available when problems arise in remote communities. The help of family members, ministers and counsellors, and a wide group of friends that might exist in a larger community does not exist in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Therefore, minor problems can grow to become serious disagreements that may affect a teacher's ability to perform at a high professional level. There is a clear need for an ongoing and systematic process of professional and personal

development for teachers newly appointed to the Lands to enable them to fit into their new teaching role as well as to be able to cope with the domestic aspects of life in an isolated location.

This article seeks to present a model of teacher development that will enhance the professionalism of teachers while also furthering the development of the structure of schooling in the Lands. It is a presupposition of this article that most teachers will be non-Aboriginal people for the next decade at least because there are currently no qualified Ngaanyatjarra teachers (although there are a few in the early stages of training). It is also a presupposition of this article that the present structure of schooling within the Lands will remain the same, at least in the short term, particularly in regard to the lack of coordinated external support structures.

### **Model of teacher development**

Teacher development must commence at the preservice stage. While it may not be possible to identify the undergraduate teachers who will take up appointments within the lands, it is reasonable to assume that most appointments will be to rural schools that may be isolated and consist of significant numbers of Aboriginal students. As a result, units of study that include the personal and professional nature of such locations would be an advantage to the preservice preparation of teachers. Similarly, close liaison between universities and rural and remote schools would allow those involved in preservice training to be exposed to the varied aspects of life in an isolated place. Teaching practices, where undergraduates spend time in remote schools, could be complemented by teachers with experience in these locations visiting universities to share experiences and knowledge of professional practice as well as ways of enjoying a satisfying lifestyle.

Models of teacher development must also recognise that there has been a recent increase in the devolution of decision-making responsibilities from the central level to the school site. From the perspective of the professional development of teachers, therefore, decisions must be measured primarily against school needs and priorities in line with a school-derived performance management structure.



A further feature of teacher development models is that, "external support personnel have a significant impact on the receptivity to new ideas and the use of Information"

10 (Ingvarson, 1990, p.169). It is important, therefore, that external agents should be engaged at various stages of teacher development. The contribution of teachers working together to solve problems and deal with school specific issues can be complemented by the role of external agents acting as advisors and facilitators. Teachers are able to process and synthesise information and ideas received from outside in order to make an appropriate school-based response.

A fourth factor that teacher development models should consider is that they must combine the components of innovation and training. Innovation is important because teachers must develop conservative risk-taking skills in order to be able to work in a section of Aboriginal education that has little tradition of expertise in appropriate curricula, structures and pedagogy. The training aspect is important in that teachers must develop an intellectual structure in order to be able to process the personal discoveries that may result from innovation (Leithwood, Begley and Cousins, 1990). Training in action research, for example, is important if a teacher is to be able to 'discover' the professional skills that become apparent as a result of risk-taking.

A fifth principle that must be considered when designing a model of teacher professional development is that the geographic isolation of schools should not be seen as a cause of professional isolation. Rather, there needs to be an extensive network between teachers and the development of an effective organisational structure that covers all schools so making it possible to disseminate information to all teachers and to foster cooperation between schools. Schools should not see themselves as 'islands' responsible for their own improvement and activity.

A final principle in regard to the development of a model of teacher growth is that schools should establish a Charter of Teaching. The charter should be consistent with the call by Schwartz (1991) that schools have attitudes and values that support change, encourage 'risk taking', and emphasise the role of teachers in addressing the needs of individual students. The charter should establish the context within which teacher development should occur because it helps describe the purpose of the school.

The teacher development model proposed for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands is summarised in Table One. It is divided into three sections - Preservice and pre-appointment phase, Early development phase (professional familiarisation), and the On-going development phase.

Preservice phases (One and Two)

Of the eight teachers newly appointed to the Lands at the beginning of 1994, only one brought any prior teaching experience (one year in a country town). One of the eight had studied Aboriginal or Cross Cultural studies while at university. Therefore, each person came to the job in the Lands with vague and inappropriate personal beliefs on the schooling of Aboriginal students. Most teachers probably approached the task, at least initially, "from their own experiences as learners, assuming that the pupils they will teach will possess aptitudes, problems, and learning styles similar to their own" (Kagan, 1992, p. 154).

**Table 1**

Teacher development model for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands

<p><u>Phase One:</u> Preservice development - final semester unit on <i>Cross Cultural and Aboriginal studies</i>, and <i>Living in an Isolated/Rural Community</i>.</p> <p><u>Phase Two:</u> Pre-appointment awareness raising - new teachers are provided with the opportunity to participate in a two-day workshop run by the Education Department and conducted by Lands principals and other appropriate agents.</p> <p>The workshop would be held in January.</p> <hr/> <p>--</p> <p><u>Phase Three:</u> School development workshop - conducted from a school-based perspective through a collaborative effort of school personnel with the aim of introducing new teachers to the school, its program for improvement, and the performance appraisal process if necessary.</p> <p>This would happen in early February probably during a non-teaching day.</p> <hr/> <p>--</p> <p><u>Phase Four:</u> Enlisting a senior teacher in the Lands to establish a network of term meetings as well as a teachers' journal that is produced four times a year.</p> <p><u>Phase Five:</u> On-going professional and personal development run by the school staff at the school site within the framework of the school Charter of Teaching.</p>
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The aim of the preservice phase, therefore, has to be to the reconstruction of personal beliefs in order for teachers to develop a clear image of themselves as teachers in a Lands' context and with appropriate skills for maximising the learning opportunities for the students. This can best commence with preservice teachers being exposed to units of study in Aboriginal and cross cultural schooling because most graduates will find their first appointment to schools where such knowledge will be valuable. Moreover, study in these areas will encourage preservice teachers to become reflective and self-critical. They will have the skills to relate early personal experiences in the classroom to knowledge given by appropriate units

and so create meaning to the experiences which will become part of the teacher's personal theory of teaching.

A second part of this phase is the awareness raising stage that should occur during late January. Newly appointed teachers would meet for a centrally organised awareness workshop. The components of this workshop might include:

- (a) A review of induction resources produced by Lands' schools.
- (b) Some initial insights into the Lands including the history of schooling in the area.
- (c) Awareness of the Education Department's position in regard to systems' issues such as social justice and the Aboriginal Education Operational plan.
- (d) The nature of Ngaanyatjarra speaking Aboriginal people and the way in which relationships are best established between Aboriginal community members and non-Aboriginal teachers.
- (e) Ideas on living in a small isolated community and the perspective that non-Aboriginal teachers should bring to this life.
- (f) The role of other non-Aboriginal employees within communities (community advisor, health sister, project officer).
- (g) The purpose and aspirations of the communities according to the Aboriginal members.
- (h) The opportunity to interact with experienced Lands' principals who can answer specific questions and soothe fears that newly-appointed teachers may feel when preparing for a new aspect of their lives.

### Early service phase (Three)

This phase aims to help new teachers acquire knowledge of the students in their community and apply it to their own perception of what it is to be a teacher. Areas of knowledge that are essential for teachers to acquire include:

- (a) The cultural (social, economic, religious) background of students and the ways in which this may impact on the school from time to time.
- (b) The contribution made by research on the schooling of Aborigines that may be useful in the classroom.
- (c) The structure of the Ngaanyatjarra language and some words that are useful to know (words that are commonly used, words that are considered as swearing and teasing).
- (d) Ways of planning (programs, daily diary, evaluation) that are consistent with the aim of maximising the learning opportunities of students (including the involvement and participation of members of the Aboriginal community).
- (e) School priorities and the way they may be addressed through the school development plan.
- (f) School procedures and operations.
- (g) Previous performance by students and pointers towards the successful teaching of each year level (such as the application of Student Out-come Statements).
- (h) The appraisal process for teachers who are in their first or second year of teaching and the general process by which performance management occurs.

#### On-going development (Four and Five)

An important philosophy behind this phase is that schools and regions should operate as professional cultures where every member is committed to the professional and personal well being of each other. The role of socialising new teachers is part of the operation of this culture and the involvement of staff, other than just principals, is the prime feature of the collaborative aspect of this culture. The notions of local level control, shared authority, and group mentorship (Harris and Collay, 1992) lie at the core of this phase.

The first feature of this phase is that teachers in the Lands should set up a formal teachers' network where peer support is formally established and enables them to interact in a variety

of ways and ensure that a variety of information is disseminated. Term meetings and a collegial journal consisting of professional as well as social items are important aspects of the networking process. An extension of the network concept is where schools collaborate to share in professional development opportunities within the Lands or outside. Schools that share priorities can pool resources to organise conferences and workshops in order to develop strategies to achieve those priorities.

The second aspect of this phase is that of mentorship. Each teacher should be encouraged to locate a mentor within the Lands and outside of the area. The mentor within the Lands would allow colleagues to discuss common issues and frustrations within a network and to come up with a range of solutions or at least clarify the questions. This person may be contacted as soon as incidents occur and would be used mainly during term time.

The mentor outside of the Lands would be best used as part of the process of reflection and personal appraisal during vacations. The mentor should be an experienced teacher. Meeting the person during vacations would allow the teacher to share problems and questions with a sympathetic person who is not involved in the situation and so is able to cast an objective eye over particular situations. The role of the critical other is essential to ensure that the professional growth of beginning teachers occurs in a balanced fashion and brings a range of expertise to a situation that may not otherwise be present within the Lands where so few teachers have any depth of professional experience or wisdom.

The third feature of this phase focuses attention on using external facilitators to provide professional development. This focus may be achieved through the use of technology (telematics, speaker telephones, video links) to interact with appropriate personnel. Externally-based facilitators would be used to assist schools to develop responses to particular issues. It would also complement Lands-based professional development opportunities and help teachers to keep up to date with current research and Education Department requirements.

## **Conclusion**

Most teachers and principals in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands are new to their positions. Moreover, the schooling process in the area is in its early stages and so is not built upon

traditions of experience and knowledge from previous years. As a result, it is important that extensive professional and personal development be provided to staff in a variety of formats. There must be a balance between input coming from outside of the Lands and that which is available from within the area. This balance must involve local Aboriginal people at certain times.

Schools need to develop a collaborative professional culture where each teacher has responsibility for others and where even their frustrations and shortcomings can form the basis for growth.

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