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Facilitating Preservice Teacher Induction Through Learning in Partnership

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Abstract: Partnership in teacher education is usually seen as needing to occur between the university and a school. This teacher education program, however, considers partnership across many stakeholders, in addition: employer authorities, community agencies and pre-service teachers themselves as active partners. Using Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, this paper explores several action research cycles of a teacher educator, examining changing practices in a regional/rural initiative. The paper explores strategies at the university to promote induction into the profession, examples of university pedagogies to facilitate professional growth and understanding of professionalism, orientation to the regional community, orientation to the school, and the support of the development of a peer group among the cohort. Pre-service teacher learning became a vehicle not only for their own professional growth but also as a vehicle for the learning of other partners, including the teacher education program itself.

Introduction

How to build partnership across multiple stakeholders to ensure a quality induction into the teaching profession is not well documented in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to examine pedagogical and community practices that can enhance a more active role for preservice teachers (PSTs) as partners in their own induction into the profession of teaching. The project reported here is a partnership between a range of groups, including the university, regional communities and schools, and the PSTs. This paper is a purposive reflection on data collected over a three year regional initiative that is a part of a teacher education program at the School of Education, University of South Australia. The participants are Master of Teaching PSTs completing their first professional experience placement, a two week block in a regional (or rural) setting at the end of their first semester of study in the program. The program asks PSTs on their first day to consider applying for a regional placement, and selects only metropolitan PSTs for the places available. On placement, the PSTs live together in one of three regional areas, and work in one of the partner schools, with a mentor teacher each. In addition, community agencies brief the PSTs on the community, provide welcoming barbecues and support for access to local activities with a range of community members.

This cohort of PSTs – 126 over the four years 2008-2011 – brings to the profession significant prior learning and a skill base which augers well for meeting school needs, addressing also the current policy focus on teacher quality and the improvement of literacy and numeracy of students in schools (COAG 2010). These PSTs are graduates from diverse backgrounds and their maturity enables them to be job-ready in a fast-tracked program in eighteen months. The program develops an approach to preservice professional experience placement which

acknowledges that immersing metropolitan graduate-entry PSTs in a regional community early in their program could provide the experience to allow graduate teachers make an informed decision about career opportunities at the completion of their degree. Because it is the first of three professional placements in the degree, the PSTs are able to build on and reflect on their regional learning in subsequent professional experience placements. We have found that the program provides PSTs with a positive and affirming opportunity and induction into the profession, and that the first immersion into a regional placement shapes later expectations of the next two placements, and change their willingness to consider regional teaching (McCallum and Carter 2009)

This paper proceeds to delineate the framework used to understand learning in partnership, focussing on how we might analyse the learning that is designed to occur across the sites of the university, the local community, the peer group and the placement school. The analytical themes emerging from the data are organised according to priorities identified by the PSTs, unfolding the 'story' of the initiative as we go. Key themes include: the importance of induction from day one of the program, the teaching and learning opportunities at the university, and the particular learning provided during professional and community placement. In the final section, I draw these themes together in order to better understand the partnership work involved, in which PSTs are an integral component.

A Framework to Understand Learning in Partnership Settings

In seeking relevant conceptual frameworks to guide the development of the regional initiative, there was significant research emerging in relation to the professional experience (Bates and Townsend 2007; Bloomfield 2009; Boylan 2003; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner 2005, Green and Reid 2004; Nuttall et al 2006; White et al 2010). However, almost all of the literature focuses predominantly on the school experience only, without understanding that the school is situated as part of a community. Place-based education literature has recently begun to address this through Green and Reid's conceptualisation of the professional experience as organised in 'situated social space' (2004).

> *[T]eacher education - like educational research as well as schooling itself - should always be understood as a situated practice. As such, it is best conceived as always located somewhere, socially, spatially and historically, and as always speaking from somewhere.* (Green & Reid 2004, p. 255)

To examine the ways in which teacher education is 'situated' in social space, a collection of scholarly resources was compiled to help all partners in the project analyse our joint work and shared roles through a focus of on learning. Work from the study of activity theory was most relevant because it helped to focus on how new practices were acquired, particularly the development of shared practices of partnership (Levine 2010). *Communities of Practice* (Wenger 1998) is a model of social learning which can be used in teacher education as a framework for our understanding of induction into teaching, and which focuses us on identifying strategies to situate preservice teachers as they move from University to school and community in regional areas. Learning is the connecting factor in 'belonging' to the community, to the school, to the university and to the teaching profession.

The Community of Practice model can be used as way to understand and analyse induction into teaching given that all learning is social (Wenger 1998; Lave and Wenger 1991). Learning in and about the school and wider community encompasses the learning of 'becoming' a teacher and the subsequent identity formation providing an analytic lens and a way of seeing PSTs as

community members, new to the profession whose positioning in placement is always on the margins to start with. Preservice teachers in their professional experience placements can be viewed "as active participants in the practice of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger 1998, p. 4). Resources and strategies are developed to support the PSTs in their *belonging* in the teaching community. The *identity* development is enhanced through strategies which value peer support and reflection is key to making *meaning* of the learning experience. The *practice* of teaching and the PSTs' ability to learn by doing requires the PSTs to go to the country to be inducted into regional schools and their wider communities. Engaging with the Community of Practice framework also gave a common language for learning to occur between the PSTs, the university, schools and community.

The concept of school sites as workplaces and learning sites acknowledges the work of Billett (2001) because it points to the need to consider different types of learning, formal and incidental learning, and learning conducive work. This concept of 'learning conducive work' or workplaces adds to the Communities of Practice framework by specifying what to focus on when analysing such communities in action and for engaging with community partners and related business models of practice. It also helps problematise the learning of professional workers and all engaged in the induction of PSTs to the community.

It is important to understand that building a Community of Practice is not automatic, and a crucial issue is how all stakeholders work with the preservice teachers, the school and the community. In order to be active agents, PSTs need to express and communicate in conversation and joint analysis with others involved, whether these others are peer PSTs, university lecturers, teachers, community members or school students. The literature on voice and student voice helps us to understand the importance of insisting on PSTs as active agents in their own right. Fielding (2009) argues that students – even those in schools – need to develop their voice in order to renew our society's civic space. This particular partnership is interested in building this notion of community as essential for democracy, helping to further the idea of the school as a means of contributing towards healthy democratic activity in our society (Reid & Gill 2010). In this project the PSTs are valued members of the community at University, in sites and in the community and their feedback are designed to be part of renewal of practices within all these sites. Unless PSTs are given legitimate participation opportunities in their various communities, then they cannot become appropriately inducted into their profession. Nor can they be part of renewal of the teaching profession, relegated to mere implementers of what others have decided for them (Connell 2009).

Methodology

This paper is drawn from a much larger study on situated placement through partnership (Australian Research Council Grant: *Renewing the teaching profession in regional areas through community partnerships*. Project ID: LP 100200499; PhD study: *Renewing the teaching profession through community partnerships*). It represents one element of the action research work on my own teaching which focuses on the PSTs: their work at university, their participation in classes, preparation for placement, in placement and reflection on placement, in group work and, where appropriate, in their transition to early years teaching in rural/regional areas. The sub-study reported here focuses on PST perspectives, with particular emphasis on their first semester of work in the Master of Teaching Program, including their first rural placement of two weeks. This is action research (Carr & Kemmis 1986) partly on my own work, representing myself as an active member of the Community of Practice of the pilot, particularly as I teach in the program,

organise and facilitate the professional experience placement process, and am a key staff member in liaising with PSTs in their regional placements. This makes me a member of several Communities of Practice: those of the staff at the university studying how to improve our practice, cooperating with PSTs as a peer CoP member, and working with the overall project as a whole across three regional sites with school and community partners.

As Noffke and Somekh (2009) argue, 'all forms of action research (and indeed all research) embody the political' (p. 8), and the politics of research in teacher education is no exception. Employers clearly have a stake in improving the provision of high quality teachers to hard to staff regions, particularly those in low SES and rural settings. Thus, there is strong interest in the program from both public and Catholic education sectors. This makes my own doctoral study more politicised and raises ethical issues about how best to share emerging data, especially data which involves PST perspectives and my own analyses of work arising from the action research on my practice.

However, action research remains a most appropriate methodology to frame the case study, as I am uniquely placed to use analysis of data to improve practice as well as to improve my understanding of the practice, and to share that understanding with key stakeholders in the employer and community agencies to improve the context of the practice, as recommended by Carr and Kemmis (1986).

A key ethical consideration is the potential for conflict of interest between my role as teacher and the students' required participation. Normal teaching and learning activities have been designed to promote thoughtful, engaged practitioners who will be oriented towards considering rural teaching. A partner investigator from the project is involved in explaining the project to the PST cohort, explaining that my teaching is the subject of my research, and that they can choose not to have their work included in the data gathering. This protects PSTs from any concern about bias on my part as their teacher. The issue of PSTs' inclusion in the research project is monitored by the partner investigator and all PSTs' work is coded with a pseudonym as the material is generated and collected only at the end of each semester. Records of the materials are in electronic form and are collected for storage in secure form in the school's research archive as per the required regulations. Ethical clearance for the project has been granted by the University of South Australia's Human Ethics Committee (P083/10).

A related ethical issue is how to protect teachers and school communities' identity when using PST reflection and other data related to the project. Communities are referred to wherever possible without reference to specific people and places as a means of safeguarding anonymity. Indeed, even university reports on the regional placement projects back to communities are now being framed as general feedback across sites, rather than specific to any one region. This also enhances the potential for transferability of learning across sites, while not claiming generalisation as arising in any specific location.

In this paper, my main framing question is 'what are PST perspectives on the university teacher education activities and school and community activities provided in their first semester'? Addressing this question has led to significant changes in university pedagogy and relationships with partners, as the following sections illustrate.

The three years of piloting represent three annual cycles of action research, where discussion and teaching with PSTs, combined with their reflection after the placement, their research on their placement site, and the materials generated in class and on placement, influence planning, teaching and partnership action for the succeeding year. Membership of several Communities of Practice in the project – university teacher education, partnership groups in each region, for example – provides diverse opportunities to analyse my own work and the materials developed to support PSTs.

A critical discourse analysis was used to explore the data from journals, group and individual interviews, field notes and PST assignments including photostories and journals. For this paper a thematic analysis of the data was then developed to understand PST perspectives on learning opportunities in the university, the professional school site and the community. A narrative of the program, from the perspective of the pre-service teachers, is presented under five main themes:

1. Induction from day 1: using data from the applications to participate;
2. University pedagogies: using data from research field notes and tapes of teaching sessions; photostories produced by PSTs; PST assignments and debriefing meetings
3. Orientation to the school: using data from debriefing focus groups prior, during and post placement, and PST evaluations post placement;
4. The importance of peers: using data from debriefing meetings and PST evaluations
5. Induction to place and community

This paper is an early effort in data analysis relating to the university and other partner pedagogies, by reflecting on PST perspectives and feedback. Already, we have responded to this data to alter university program development, school induction and community activities on placement. However, it should be emphasised that this is only a first stage of analysis of the extensive data that has begun to emerge from the program.

Priority Themes For Psts

Induction from day 1

The PSTs enrolled in the Master of Teaching bring considerable skills and knowledge because they have a prior degree which forms the basis of their teaching specialisations and because they are experienced in work, travel and other life experiences. The Master of Teaching covers both Primary-Middle and Middle-Secondary teacher education programs, with around 250 per annum in these programs over the four years 2008-2011.

The application process to participate in regional initiative commences on the first day of the first subject. Previous PSTs, principals and community partners brief the entire cohort on regional schools and PST experiences. In the year prior to the initial pilot in 2008, only 4 PSTs had applied for country placement. In 2008, around 55 applied, with 26 successfully placed in Whyalla. In 2009, with three sites, 78 PSTs applied and 55 were offered placements. In 2010, 110 applied for 45 places. Placement numbers in 2010 were dependent not only on local willingness but also on funding availability. Clearly, the ripple effect of earlier years' success has spread throughout the student body (Author and co-author 2009). For example, one PST in 2010 noted that a friend from the 2008 cohort had recommended that, if she went teaching, she should apply for the rural placement initiative as this would enhance her understanding of possibilities. The 2008 PST is now teaching in the country herself.

The applications completed by the PSTs to be considered for the initiative reveal much about the PST cohort, their backgrounds and expectations of the profession. As the number of applicants increase, we can be more specific in what we look for in terms of the applications, and the resources the PSTs can contribute to the various communities.

In the initial 2008 year, the disciplinary backgrounds of the PSTs varied across Engineering (2 PSTs), Pharmacy (1), Human Movement or Health Sciences (8), Applied Science (4), Humanities (6), Design and Technology (3) and the Arts (2). This diversity has continued over the years, to include research scientists, podiatrists, lawyers and a doctor. The high calibre

of the PSTs surprises the regional school sector as they have not previously seen this impressive level of prior qualifications. The literacy and numeracy, ICT and social backgrounds of the PSTs are also developed, offering enriching resources to regional schools.

In addition to high qualifications, Masters PSTs also have more extensive life experiences compared to younger undergraduate students. Many PSTs use the opportunity of the Master of Teaching to change careers and, as adult learners, they bring workplace knowledge and understandings along with disciplinary knowledge and life experiences, to their expectations of what it is to be a teacher. They have chosen the teaching profession deliberately and consciously, and this is reflected in their enthusiasm, noted in their applications for the program, and commented upon by the schools.

The process of applying for a position in the project enables the PSTs to articulate their own expectations and judgements. "I have a strong scientific background which is backed by real life experiences and common sense", says one PST, who knows that the regional areas have shortages in science teaching, while recognising that disciplinary expertise is not enough to make one a valued teacher. Another argues that she brings "[l]ife experiences, cultural and political understanding, networking knowledge, an understanding of educational planning". The importance of building relationships with students' communities is well-recognised as key to making one a valued teacher in a community: "I have lived and worked in many places and with a diverse range of people", argues one, while another suggests she has "[v]ery good interpersonal skills, an inquiring mind and a passion for education". Applicants report on their willingness to undertake new and challenging experiences: 'I have had a lot of experience, jumping into new situations, having moved many times ...".

As the university teacher educator, paying attention to the diversity of the PSTs, and taking seriously their perspectives as colleagues in the profession, I see the challenges for the university program include: (1) building on the strengths of this diversity, (2) providing opportunities for the PSTs to develop into peer professionals capable of collegiality, (3) balancing the valuing of existing skills with the challenge of developing new skills and knowledge in different school contexts, and (4) translating the challenges into pedagogies that work to support the development of professional knowledge, practice and dispositions to renew the profession. These challenges continue to inform and shape the evolving on-campus curriculum over the three years.

By commencing induction into the profession from day 1, through such activities as immersion into professional discussions with senior members of the profession and prior PSTs, the emerging professional identity and new habits can become the focus of explicit teaching. This allows the PSTs to explore their own interests, expertise and its relevance to teaching, through building the peer cohort and an orientation to how such life backgrounds might be relevant to teaching becomes a question able to be openly explored in class with peers and university mentors.

University pedagogies

A range of pedagogies have developed over the three years, with an increasing emphasis on more explicit teaching. This includes modelling a meta-language through which PSTs can position themselves as learners in communities of practice, developing a language with which to discuss their own and others' practice and the organisational and community context in which these practices occur. Here I reflect on two of the main pedagogical strategies we have used:

firstly, the use of PST photo-stories and, secondly, PST research about the communities prior to their arrival.

Photostories provide a good medium for PSTs to talk about their prior learning and also encourage them to consider their own emerging professional positioning in relation to principals, students, and fellow teachers appropriate to their new role as teacher. Photostories provide a set of photo snapshots of PSTs prior work environments, family and disciplinary and other expertise. Having to think professionally about the photostory audience focusses PSTs on the core problematics of becoming a teacher: what kinds of relationship are essential, how to provide information and a sense of self without straying into social networking arenas and sharpens awareness of professional identity well before the first two week placement. The photostories are sent to the schools and community agencies ahead of the placement.

Over the three years, we have learned, from analysing and critiquing the photostories, that more explicit scaffolding is needed to encourage reflection on the identity of PSTs as teachers. The photostory has become a significant tool for peer discussion about professionalism. For example, in the 2008 year, the editing required to develop the photostories was exhausting for all concerned because PSTs included personal information that was inappropriate, paralleling current discussions on the appropriate use of social networking spaces such as Facebook. Through the photostories, discussions around the representation of self have included issues such as dress, and relationships with students and colleague teachers. Initially, not enough time was allocated in the semester to provide for this extensive discussion and revision of self-representation and professionalism. The partner schools have also given the PSTs and the university feedback on the relevance and appropriateness of the photostories, which has been taken into account not only by the individuals concerned but also by me as the course coordinator in designing the work required and the criteria for a 'successful' photostory.

As a 'border crossing' (Wenger 1998) strategy for PSTs entering the school community, the photostory helps the school community to orient itself and focus on the work needed to induct the PST into the school community and the practices that are necessary for successful participation. PSTs have reported feeling known – "not a stranger in the school" – on arrival. They felt welcomed, expected and planned for. Photostories allow the PSTs to make a story about their lives and most are accustomed to social networking technologies such as Facebook. What they *do* find challenging are the choices – what should they say about themselves, and what should they omit? Developing an appropriate professional introduction forces PSTs to orient themselves as professionals and to 'imagine' their anticipated role in the school and community challenges familiar usages of social networking sites and provides an opportunity for PSTs to examine their understandings of what it is to be a professional teacher.

Green (2009, pp. 6-7) notes that there are at least four senses in which the term *professional practice* might be understood: practising a profession, practising professionalism, evoking a moral-ethical quality, and professional in contrast to amateur. The production of the photostory helps the PSTs, before they go out to 'practise' as a professional and to explore the moral-ethical qualities implicated in the professional position. The role of teacher has specific professional connotations, which the PSTs, in their photostories, need to navigate. The realisation by us, as teacher educators, that this can become a tool for understanding one's positioning as a professional, and a contribution towards renewal of professionalism, has prompted more detailed pedagogical discussions around what counts as appropriate self-representation for a teacher, and requires attention to both the specific community and the school setting ahead of arrival for a first placement.

A second key pedagogy used in our teacher education program requires the PSTs to work in groups to research the future placement community. By being placed in tutorial groups

organised by the regional setting and school setting, the PSTs have the opportunity to build an awareness of each other as peers. The shared research project has been designed to enhance peer orientation to the diversity of each setting. For example, some PSTs were interested in Indigenous health, while others used more general population health and epidemiological data to gain an understanding of the overall diversity in the community they would be entering. The federal government's *MySchool* website, with its *Index of Community Soci0-Economic Advantage* data and other employer and school-based information was another source of information valued by PSTs, even as they debated the efficacy or even accuracy of the information they retrieved. Tourism, sporting, weather, local government and economic development board websites were also analysed for their relevance to understanding the social space and place they would be encountering. This project corroborates the work of Reid et al (2010) who find that necessary factors to support 'situatedness' include the inter-relationship and understanding of rural space in terms of geographic, economic and social knowledge. This project adds the dimension of community as key to providing the PSTs a link for *knowing* the social space of children they will be teaching (Reid et al 2010). The PST knowledge of the community supports the situating process for the PSTs who are likely to have come in with more of a metro-centric knowledge of regional schooling and communities.

Regional groups of PSTs present their research to peers over a day, assisting in the production of high quality information and ensuring a level of peer support for making judgements about the information. The ICT skills required, and triangulation of data from different sources, raise issues for them about how diversity itself might be dealt with in that community. The PSTs become partners in understanding their role by taking responsibility for building and sharing their knowledge. We have noted that, by building such knowledge ahead of time, the school and its community seem less daunting and the PSTs become excited about the range and potential of the community and its school. There are thus fewer surprises on arrival in a strange community, and an informed orientation to the possibilities offered in the situation. Furthermore, the schools and communities appreciate the PSTs' level of preparedness for the two-week placement. One 2010 mentor teacher acknowledged that the PST knew more about the region when they arrived than he did, as recorded in the student's journal. The preparation allows PSTs to develop a knowledge base about the region and an appreciation of context and situatedness. One argued in her reflection on the placement:

> *Knowledge of place is important in relation to understanding the students we will be teaching, their backgrounds and how this enhances learning. Really beneficial to understand the town and circumstances, that they are a little bit isolated really, helped with my teaching. What sort of jobs and what sort of employment would these students likely go into and what would they be thinking they would want to go into helped put your teaching into context. Being able to say science comes into [the location]like this and you see science in your town not just the city. Really great putting the sense of place into the context of your learning and understanding where those students were likely to head. It was really great to put a sense of place into my teaching.*

Here can be seen the language of the course being taken up by the PST, relating the importance of space and place to specific teaching design issues. The following PST also used the explicit language of the course to help make sense of the learning:

> *Increasing the knowledge I built up in the prac experience about place and that connection with community, and doing background reading beforehand and then building on this, understanding kids in context and how they see their opportunities was valuable.*

One 2009 PST, with a marine biology degree, discovered that the giant cuttlefish in the Whyalla region could be built into her curriculum planning as the timing of the placement would coincide with key events in the lifecycle of these extraordinary creatures. Subsequently, the school was so impressed with her level of planning and expertise that she became a key figure in planning a science unit that really engaged students at the school and made her a valued colleague. As a result of this early orientation, this PST was able to participate in high level curriculum planning with other teachers connected to place.

As outlined, these two pedagogies with the PSTs have taught the teacher educators involved in the program to centre the PSTs' learning and to be more explicit about their teaching. Over the three years, the PSTs' feedback and responses have allowed for curriculum development which acknowledges the PSTs as active agents and partners in the project. Noticeable changes implemented in the curriculum have been informed by all stakeholders in the partnership structure (PSTs, University, school community and wider community). This project has helped me to appreciate the diversity of the PST cohort, and to develop a more PST-centred teaching model which acknowledges the skills and life learning that graduate PSTs bring to teaching. Changes to the on-campus curriculum continue to evolve and these changes incorporate feedback from the PSTs, the University, the schools and community. The PSTs enjoy being included and valued in the partnership and their sense of ownership of their learning is a powerful motivator to succeed. Together the PSTs build a 'spatial self-help map' (Halsey 2006) to use as they navigate the community and its school.

Orientation to the school

In the debriefing process after the placement, the PSTs are asked to comment on the induction they received in the first day/s of school. The Principals involved in the project value the feedback of the PSTs, enabling them to critique their current induction processes. For example, it became obvious that schools involved in the program employed a range of approaches in their efforts to both welcome and orientate PSTs into their respective schools. Those considered to be most effective by all the PSTs were the more formal approaches. A formal welcome on arrival, tour of the campus, and the provision of written and verbal information (e.g. staff handbook with school policies, campus map, staff list and an introduction to their mentor teacher) were cited as being most useful in assisting PSTs to feel both welcome and sufficiently informed to begin their first teaching experience. In one school, a morning staff meeting was conducted to welcome the PSTs and this was seen as a positive way to begin the process, but this was not necessarily possible in all schools.

Most PSTs indicated that they thought that the induction they received was adequate, with over 80% of the 126 in their debriefing questionnaire considering it to be exactly what was needed for them to feel welcome and ready to teach. Those who received a formal welcoming gesture said that they felt at once a sense of relief, given the nervous anticipation many had felt prior to their placement, and a sense that the school viewed their placement as positive. It was appreciated when one person from the leadership was identified as the contact person regarding professional experience matters. According to PST feedback, this contact person valued them and their confidence increased accordingly. When the induction was of an informal nature, the PSTs had to navigate their own way, and some seemed to struggle with confidence as a result. One of the schools in the project, having received this feedback, subsequently requested the University to assist them with developing an induction program for their staff, which has now been provided, drawn up by me based on the PST feedback from other sites.

Debriefing meetings with the PSTs are conducted pre, during and post placement to provide feedback on strategies to support their learning and to suggest changes to the program. The example of PST-identified shortcomings with induction, which were then addressed by the schools, shows the feedback loop at work, and such examples are found from year to year. The schools are also incorporating knowledge and resource development as support for new graduate teachers which is contributing to the sustainability of the teaching profession. Employer bodies have also been involved and have significant interest in the PSTs' perspectives as this is their first placement in schools and their first introduction to the profession.

Partnership meetings, facilitated by the teacher educator, allow for a sharing of PSTs' feedback, assist partners with preparing induction, and encourage employer authorities to consider PST perspectives when developing strategies to recruit and retain teachers. Thus the teacher educators work not only with the PSTs but with various stakeholders to help make the program sustainable and to enable PST perspectives to be heard by stakeholders.

Induction to place and community

The 2010 PSTs commented favourably on the induction to the Indigenous communities, particularly the opportunity to meet Elders and to understand the links between health and education, offered by the Aboriginal Rural Health group in one region for the first time in 2010. Health workers in turn were also surprised by the level of awareness and interest demonstrated by those PSTs who had done research on this community.

One PST, a keen competitive sportsman, reflected at the end of his placement: *It was sad to leave but had a feeling I'd be returning one day.* He has now taken up employment in a two-teacher school. This is a significant in the light of the difficulty in finding appropriate staff for remote Aboriginal schools.

One former PST, now working in the country, noted that:

> *The situating experience works, and I did not necessarily need to come back for my final placement. From this I knew enough about the school and community to make a decision to work there. The two week initiative was enough.*

It is interesting to note here that the language of 'situating' was still in place eighteen months later, underscoring the importance of explicit teaching and the use of a meta-language. It also confirms the importance of undertaking the first placement in rural settings, where previously it was available only for highly competent PSTs in their third or final placement. This initiative has created a resource among the PSTs which infuses the whole program. For the sophisticated metro-centric PSTs in our program, the orientation to community, and through community to the students, adds important dimensions to their understanding of situated pedagogy and curriculum.

In later metropolitan placements, the PSTs from this initiative reflect explicitly on how different their induction to school was, their lack of orientation to community, and the loss of peer support. They felt 'lonely' on placement, which has important implications for other aspects of our teacher education programs and presents a challenge to how we model professionalism at the university.

Having researched the community ahead of time, the PSTs were able to accelerate their participation in the community and its range of activities, seeing it also as a resource for learning for themselves as well as potentially for their students. Focusing the PSTs on the authenticity of the learning process of their students in schools and as their core responsibility as teachers was enhanced by adopting the framework of productive pedagogies as key to enhancing an

improving the learning of students in rural schools. The productive pedagogy framework (Hayes et al, 2006) is a strategic focus in the on-campus curriculum which adopts the premise that you cannot teach students well if you do not know them.

Once the PSTs make the shift in adopting their responsibilities as a teacher early, they become focussed on how to best engage these regional students in relevant and meaningful learning. Adopting the productive pedagogy domains of: intellectual quality to promote depth in delivery of teaching, connectedness to link with students lives, a supportive environment which is underpinned with building positive relationships in the classroom and working with and valuing difference is a framework which has really supported the PSTs to focus on strategies to support meaningful learning. It helps them to ask questions of how knowledge of place (Gruenewald & Smith 2008) can further enhance effective teaching and learning (Groundwater-Smith et al 2009). A PST comment is testament to this approach:

> *While I was initially shocked by the behaviour of some students in the first couple of days, by getting to know them, I began to understand them as individuals. I came to realise that despite their swagger and colourful language, they were still children trying to navigate their place in the world – effective teaching and learning depends on building strong and respectful relationships.*

This PST is in his first semester at the University and is already demonstrating a level of maturity for understanding the environment he is contemplating teaching in. In the navigational process for this PST, peers provided a balance to support him emotionally and socially in understanding the school community.

The importance of peers

Peer support is fostered at the University and in the early stages of the course to develop a professional network for reflection and learning. Negotiating their way into University and then the school community and wider community requires 'border crossing' skills (Wenger 1998) which are explicitly taught in the university classes. Indeed, the Wenger framework of learning has become an important focus for class work, research into community, and debriefing. It provides a meta-language for PSTs to frame their experience and take responsibility for their own part in the preparation for placement and when participating in school and community activities on placement. The interpretive community, jointly using this language, helps to focus shared issues and further build common experience across the peer group. To develop as a professional, reflection and debriefing on practical activities is encouraged, in the context of a community. This approach to identity development builds on the notion that identity is shared.

The PSTs in each cohort identified peer support to be one of the highlights of the regional initiative. Every preservice teacher in the debrief data commented on the sense of support, bonding, camaraderie and the formation of what they hope to be new and lasting friendships and professional collegiality. The ability to be able to work alongside their peers at school, and debrief and plan together at the end of the day was an experience the preservice teachers found to be beneficial to their professional and personal growth. For many, this was surprising as they had not originally considered the benefits that living together might have:

> *I know that I speak for all rural placement students when I say that sharing our diverse teaching experiences following each day was a resource that simply would not have been possible outside of the rural placement. Having a real family of fellow pre-service teachers to offer support, advice and encouragement was an unexpected, but invaluable aspect of my placement (2010).*

Peer learning and the positive contribution of this to accelerated learning were underestimated when setting up the pilot. The 2009 group of preservice teachers instigated their own Facebook network to continue the strong friendships and support they experienced during the regional initiative, and to allow the learning to continue throughout their time at University. Their example was followed by the 2010 group.

Peer support was so crucial to reflection, support and development. Debriefing our days with one another gave us confidence. Building these relationships gave me so much. These relationships continued throughout my whole degree (2009).

Peer support was the most important part of this prac. Living with my peers really helped me develop supportive friendships and being able to debrief at the end of the day was great and much needed!

Being able to talk to my peers increased my personal growth as a teacher by allowing me to take risks and use alternative teaching pedagogy (2009).

Eighteen months after her first placement, one Year 6/7 teacher working in a rural school remembers:

Also it was fun and the mates you made were a really important aspect. I have a good 3 or 4 close friends from the group; we have all supported each other through Uni and still keep in close contact. On the initiative you could debrief and they would give a different perspective or help with a lesson plan.[As a primary PST] I found being with secondary teachers interesting as you would also have a secondary viewpoint which would help to understand the middle school students in my class.

As one of the key pieces of advice for other PSTs contemplating regional placement, the role of peers for this teacher still remains as a key outcome of the placement as well as supporting professional growth during the placement. When liaising with these PSTs throughout their degree it becomes evident there was also a component of accelerated learning which occurred while on placement and the ability to debrief and analyse critical incidents which happened in various schools allowed for rich learning to occur. This forms a microcosm of the kinds of professional learning which needs to occur over the teacher's career life, and builds good habits of shared reflection as the basis for robust professionalism.

The importance of the PST peer cohort, initially underestimated, was explicitly planned for in subsequent years. Having understood more of how much PSTs valued their peer learning, I was able to build in more opportunities for peer learning both at the university site and by placing them together in shared accommodation in the regional placements. Far more time is now spent at the university in group work, in presenting learning and debriefing in groups, both in this initial semester and in later shared work.

Conclusion: The Centrality of PSTs as Partners in the Project

This paper contributes to research in teacher education by illustrating how PSTs' perspectives as active agents in the partnership can have a significant impact on the teacher education program and on the other partners' understanding of what shared teacher education might be. In this sense, all parties in this partnership have become a 'community of practice', learning with and from each other. This action research with the PSTs places them at the centre of the project of teacher education. As Master of Teaching PSTs, it is almost impossible to treat them as 'students' because they have so much life, work experience and disciplinary expertise to share. Their active agency has been critical in shifting the university program, the community role and the changed activities at the schools where they worked during a two-week placement.

The program at University maximises the opportunities for them to become a deliberate community of peer learners in the University, the schools and community, which can contribute in turn to the sustainability of teacher education and partnership. The expansion of our understanding of peer professionalism into all sites of this partnership activity will continue to require investigation by all concerned. It is central to the learning by the PSTs, making the 'socially situated teacher education' discussed by Green (2004) and Reid et al (2010) even more complex. Wenger (1998) argues that the different domains of learning are all important. *Learning by 'doing'* – participating in teaching and other school-based activities, participating in community activities such as sporting, shopping, social and recreational activities and participating in peer professional exchanges at university and in the community – provides major opportunities for learning in practice. Obviously, a great deal more 'practice' was engaged in than only classroom learning about teaching. The wide range of practices taken up in the sites offers an induction into professional practice which more accurately reflects the lived reality of the diversity of teachers' work. *Meaning making* – with peers, with community, with students, with teachers and Principals during placement and, afterwards, the sharing, ripple effect of word of mouth within the University with lecturers and other peers - further develops a shared meta-language of situated understandings. The *identity work* evident in the photostory development allows for the explicit process of learning becoming a teacher. *Community work* or *belonging* – emphasises the need for a teacher is to build a range of professionally-orientated relationships. In this project PSTs work with their peer community, university teacher education community, school community as a sub-set of the profession, and of the community of the social space in the region. Wenger's framework of the CoP as a learning community is helpful in pointing out the complex dimensions of professional learning in different community domains needed for PSTs to enter the teaching profession. This is far more complex and integrated a set of processes than the dominant image of learning theory at university and practice in the school.

The importance of PST agency at all times across all dimensions of the program, including work with community and schools, cannot be underestimated in its contribution to the induction of a new professional. Although in this paper I have been concerned with only the first two week placement in the Master of Teaching, the findings to date suggest this is a rich and pivotal process in the induction of new teachers. Making the university teaching more explicit about the positioning of the teacher and its potential for growth in professional identity is not always an easy process for the university. However, as we have seen, the PSTs appreciate the preparation, research and orientation to imagining themselves as professionals and working through the problems and difficulties of managing themselves, their relationships and their professional work. Two weeks does seem, if the orientation to school and community is accomplished to maximise the learning, to be long enough for PSTs to make informed decisions about their future locations as teachers. This has strong messages for recruitment and a relatively small investment for employers in hard to staff regional areas. It should also be noted that without the small investments in accommodation and living allowances, the program could not run. This is not fundable within current university funding arrangements for teacher education programs.

This study was unable to take up a significant number of issues raised in the focus on teacher education and the importance of partnership. For example, only a small selection of student journals, assignments and debriefing perspectives could be included in the themes reported in this article. The balance from the perspective of other partners is only briefly alluded to, and needs to be taken up in both my own and the ARC project's larger study. While it can be seen that there are significant and important learning's from their first semester and a two week placement, this is too short a time for making larger generalisations and does not attempt to track

PSTs later into the program or their teaching except in a couple of instances. This too will need further research. The work of a teacher educator in learning from her students is also never complete; the complexity of this task of ongoing reflection and curriculum-pedagogical work is hard to capture in a short article or even a longer book length work. In trying to provide an overview, in this article i have focussed on generative themes and issues arising from my own action research that can and will be the subject on further systematic investigation. The literature tends to treat PSTs as the object of a reforming gaze, whereas this project values them as active agents in designing, preparing for and positioning themselves in a rural/regional community as part of their identity work in becoming a teacher. In this paper the data supports the situated, place-based teacher education focus of the University's role in inducting PSTs into the profession. This approach may well be used to address teacher shortages in regional and hard-to-staff areas by providing a framework for renewal which ultimately leads to sustainability of the workforce by PSTs making informed decisions about opportunities for them in regional schools.

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