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## Preparing Pre-service Teachers for Professional Engagement Through Place/community Pedagogies and Partnerships

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*Abstract: There is an expectation that Australian teachers engage professionally in all aspects of teaching and learning, including engagement with teaching networks and broader communities. This paper reports on a partnership between a teacher educator and an environmental educator who set out to expand pre-service teachers' professional knowledge, engagement and practice in an undergraduate Bachelor of Education (primary) course. The paper reports on a study about teacher education students' perspectives of fieldwork-based learning and its potential to inform students' future engagement with the broader school community. Using a conceptual framework of place- and community based education, the study examined data from an electronic survey and student teacher fieldwork reflections to better understand how pre-service teachers interpret the benefits of working with local schools, and community-based representatives. Findings suggest pre-service teachers' professional engagement was significantly enhanced as a consequence of partnership fieldwork. The implications for teacher education and future teacher practice are discussed.*

**Keywords:** teacher education, student teacher, fieldwork, place and community pedagogies

### Introduction and background

*Teacher education has found itself front and centre as a target for critiques about its impact on and abilities to prepare highly qualified teachers who are able to educate all of their students to achieve the highest learning outcomes (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013, p. 394).*

Debates about how we do teacher education, its quality and consistency, and the calibre and readiness of teaching graduates are issues of international concern. Like other countries grappling with how best to deliver teacher education programs that produce highly quality graduating teachers well prepared to support student learning, and participate as accomplished professionals (The American Psychological Association Taskforce, 2014), Australia is undergoing its own critique and renewal of quality teacher education (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), 2014). The imperative to ensure consistency and rigour across all teacher education programs is clearly stated in the TEMAG report *Action Now: Classroom ready Teachers*, which identifies the significant public concern over the quality of initial teacher education in Australia, and an explicit agenda for a “reformed, integrated system of initial teacher education” (TEMAG, 2014, p. viii).

Currently, all practicing Australian teachers are expected to adhere to seven Professional and School Leadership Standards set by the Australian Institute for Teaching

and School Leadership (AITSL), which includes: Professional knowledge; Content knowledge; Professional practice; Creative and safe learning environments; Assessment and reporting; Professional engagement; and Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community (AITSL, 2015). While each of the standards correlate to the current teacher education program highlighted in this paper, it is Standard 7.4: *Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities*, namely, understanding the role of external professionals and community representatives in broadening teachers' professional knowledge and practice, that largely informs the paper. Despite the overarching mandate, and in particular Standard 7 that aims "to increase community participation in schools" (AITSL, 2015), the wider research literature suggests there is a great deal of work ahead to achieve a satisfactory level of effective school-community partnerships (Broadbent & Brady, 2013; Flowers & Chodkiewicz, 2009; Lowenstein, Martusewicz, & Voelker, 2010).

Addressing this gap, and situated in the broader discourse of teacher education and teacher preparedness for future teaching, this paper analyses data collected from longitudinal research investigating the impact of fieldwork and community engagement in a four-year undergraduate (primary) degree at a regional university in Gippsland, Victoria. Even though 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate student teachers at this university experience 'fieldwork' as school-based practicum, fieldwork in the context of this paper is constituted as leaving the classroom to experience teaching and learning 'out in the field' (Crimmel, 2003; Curtis, 2008). The study emerged from a partnership between a teacher educator and an environmental/biodiversity educator from Bug Blitz™, a not for profit organisation that aims to raise children's awareness and knowledge of biodiversity through practical field science and arts based activities in local outdoor settings. Our collective interest in field-related coursework and its capacity to advance local places and their unique ecologies as critical sites for teaching and learning (Lippard, 1997; Watso, 2011) underpinned a 12-week core teacher education subject *Movement, environment and community* (MEC). A key aim of MEC was to simultaneously examine the individual constructs of 'movement', 'environment' and 'community', while critiquing them as a combined pedagogical framework that might inform teaching and learning across multiple learning areas such as English, mathematics, health, science, geography, sustainability, environmental education and the arts. Inherent within the MEC framework is the idea that learning occurs through action and movement. It is in this spirit that learning is 'embodied' - as opposed to 'passive' - occurring through sensorial engagement and physical interactions in local landscapes via investigative and inquiry approaches that enable children to ask questions and investigate as part of learning.

In this subject we applied a place/community-based framework (Smith & Sobel, 2010; Zachariou & Symeou, 2009) that emphasised the significance of local people, local knowledge and local places as "the central texts for teaching and learning" (Smith, 2013, p. 213), and developed two 'in the field' experiences designed to introduce teacher education students to two distinctive outdoor settings that would frame the focus for teaching and learning. The first field day was a 'learning' experience that involved student teachers learning from/with community citizens (environmental educators, biologist, artist, and field and game hunters) through structured lessons and activities at an ecologically rich wetland. The second 'teaching' field day involved student teachers developing 40 minute lessons in a university ground setting with children from five local schools. The place/community fieldwork approach was scaffolded by three main aims: (1) to introduce the field as a pedagogical resource (Cook, 2008); (2) to facilitate relationships with community organisations and individuals in local settings (Ardoin, Castrechini, & Hofstedt, 2014); and (3) to model a collaboration between multiple stakeholders that fostered environmental and biodiversity education (Monroe et al., 2015). The aims were informed by an earlier teacher education subject *Understanding Space and Place* (see Power & Green, 2014; Somerville &

Green, 2012) that adopted a place pedagogy framework constituted by three elements: our relationship to place is constituted in stories (and other representations); the body is at the centre of our experience of place; and place is a contact zone of cultural contact (Somerville, 2010, p. 335).

The first section of the paper provides a snapshot of the region and study sites where the project occurred, which is followed by an examination of the relevant research literature in relation to teaching and learning in outdoor settings, and place/community-based education. The methodology, research design, methods and analysis procedures are then explained. Next, three emergent themes frame a broad discussion about student teacher perceptions of fieldwork experience, new relations with community members, and their collective impact on teaching and learning. The paper concludes with a discussion about the implications of the findings for teacher education, and makes reference to the significance of local people, local knowledge and local places as central texts for teaching and learning.

## **The Study**

### **The Gippsland Region**

The study was undertaken in the Gippsland region, an area that makes up approximately 18% of the Victorian landmass with a population of approximately 280,000 people. Geographically and demographically complex, Gippsland extends from the outskirts of the capital city of Melbourne towards to the New South Wales border. Like many regional areas, Gippsland and its bioregions faces its own set of economic, ecological, cultural and social challenges such as intergenerational poverty and unemployment, as well as high incidence of mental and physical health problems, many of which are linked to eco-social matters of sustainability such as climate change, transition to low carbon economies, and declining natural resources. Three years ago a new regional university was established in the region. In working with the university's charter, namely, a commitment to building partnerships and collaborations with/in local communities, the underpinning content, skills and knowledge of the university's teacher education program is built on partnership frameworks that occur between the School of Education and the wider community. By way of example, the partnership featured in this paper is one of several that exist within the current teacher education program. Given the majority of graduating university students (over 70%) will take up teaching jobs across the Gippsland region, we recognise the importance of working in collaboration with rural and regional schools and communities to build pre-service teacher professional engagement.

### **The Study Sites**

Two distinct environments underpin the partnership, and we identify each as unique "centers of experience" that have the pedagogical capability to teach student teachers about "how the world works, and how our lives, and our teaching practice, fit into the spaces we occupy" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 647). Like others before us who have applied and theorised place pedagogies as frameworks for enabling individuals to experience, understand and value for themselves the entwined and sensorial connections that exist between people and place (Hill, 2013; Somerville, 2010; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009), we view the sites and their various forces and forms (Duhn, 2012), as central to the teaching and learning experience.

At the first site, the Heart Morass wetlands, student teachers were introduced to its history and diverse ecologies through a range of structured activities conducted by community citizens - a community artist, a sustainability officer, field and game hunters, a

field naturalist, a botanist and two environmental and biodiversity educators. Students participated in bird watching, drawing, bug and insect collections, water monitoring, composting, and botanical plant pressing activities, all of which focused on specific aspects of the wetland environment. Once an overgrazed farming area, the private 1370-hectare wetland was purchased by a group of key stakeholders (Bug Blitz Trust, West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, Field and Game Australia, Watermark Inc., and the Hugh Williamson Foundation) who support a current restoration plan to retrieve the ecological integrity of the wetlands, and increase the health of the tributaries that connect it to the Gippsland Lakes. Since 2006 over 60,000 indigenous trees, grasses and shrubs have been planted; a weed eradication program has removed blackberries, boxthorn and other invasive grasses, and 20 tonnes of unwanted carp have been eliminated. Currently over 30,000 water bird species have returned to the wetland (see <http://www.wgcma.vic.gov.au/our-region/projects/heart-morass-2>).

The second field site constituted the ‘built’ and ‘natural’ environments of a regional university campus. Using features within the expansive outdoor grounds - established native trees, pockets of shrubby bush land, extended grassed areas, a large human-made lake, an open rotunda teaching shelter, a makeshift hut (built by Arts students), and a semi-circular bluestone outdoor amphitheatre - student teachers conducted rotational 40-minute lessons for over 200 children at a day dubbed ‘*The Living Classroom*’. Their lessons drew on a range of inter-disciplinary subjects e.g. maths, drama, the arts, Aboriginal studies and environmental education that were aligned with the Victorian curriculum framework and AusVELS, which stems from the national Australian curriculum (see <http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/>). Classroom teachers from visiting schools worked alongside the student teachers and assisted in moving students through several rotations throughout the day.

## **A Review of the Literature**

### **Teaching and Learning in Outdoor Settings**

The benefits of using the outdoors as a teaching and learning site for students, educators, schools, and the wider community are well articulated across the wider research literature (Davis, Rea, & Waite, 2006; O'Brien, 2009). In their *Final Report of the Outdoor Classroom in a Rural Context*, Dillon et al. define the outdoor classroom as “those spaces where students can experience familiar and unfamiliar phenomena beyond the normal confines of the classroom” (2005, p. 19). Referred to by others as “learnsapes” (Skamp, 2007), these spaces might include school grounds, community gardens, wetlands and other local and nearby places, all of which are described as critical for fostering children’s relationships with natural environments (Bowker, 2007). According to Beames et al, such places are *the* starting point for meaningful learning through a sustained engagement with people and the landscape itself (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012). While the classroom tends to be the dominant space where teaching and learning occurs (Skamp, 2007, 2010), the practice of exiting the classroom to engage in fieldwork opportunities is becoming increasingly common (Higgins, Nicol, Beames, Christie, & Scrutton, 2013; Humberstone & Stan, 2011). Broad in its endeavour, outdoor pedagogies aim to advance the development of an environmental ethic of care (Clayton, 2007; Knapp, 1999; Martusewicz, 2005), ecological literacy (Barlow & Stone, 2005; Cutter-Mackenzie & Smith, 2003) and environmental sustainability (Lloyd & Gray, 2014) as part of everyday learning.

A substantial body of work illustrates the ways in which outdoor pedagogies or field work are becoming increasingly utilised to develop student teachers’ knowledge, skills and dispositions (Rupert, 2013) and progress pedagogical judgement (Horn & Campbell, 2015).

In a study on pre-service early childhood educators' perceptions of outdoor settings for example, Ernst and Tornabene (2012) used survey research and photographs of the outdoors to understand how pre-service educators perceive them, including the educational opportunities, motivations, and barriers associated with them. Significantly, participants identified local parks as the most popular site for achieving educational outcomes. In another study that examined the underlying discourses of teaching SOSE (The Study of Society and Environment), teacher education students were asked to determine appropriate on-campus sites suitable for children's enquiry that would serve as the basis for future lesson planning (Johnston, 2007). The research methods that tuned student teachers into the pedagogical scope of the site through sketching, drawing, recording textures and location, and noting sounds, are of great relevance to our own teacher education work, particularly given the artefacts were used to scaffold future lessons and curriculum development.

### **Place/Community-Based Education**

Throughout the literature, place-based education (PBE) is understood as a way of developing more locally responsive education that acknowledges natural locals and their associated ecosystems (Bowers, 2002). According to others (Orr, 2004, 2005; Smith, 2007) PBE holds great pedagogical potential for developing children's relationships with the ecological systems that exist within the places they live and go to school. Elsewhere, the pedagogical impact of connecting learners to their local places and communities has been examined (Fisman, 2005; Penetito, 2009; Somerville & Green, 2015), and is recognised as an essential element of children's success in schooling (Nixon & Comber, 2009). Many of these ideas are taken up in the special journal edition of Place-Based Education and Practice: Observations from the Field in *Children, Youth and Environments* (Barratt & Barratt Hacking, 2011) where the authors highlight three main themes of PBE: 1) theoretical and pedagogical developments in place-based education; 2) learning in schoolyards and nature sites; and 3) community collaborations. The special edition articles are united by the belief that PBE research may lead to the construction of new knowledge about places and new understandings about the relationship between people and place. Expanding on these issues, White and Reid's (2008) research into the contributions of place-consciousness in teacher education programs argues for a closer examination of the ways teacher education might better prepare beginning teachers to teach in rural schools. Correlations between this study and our own are noteworthy given the shared intention to critique and develop teacher education programs that "provide a framework for enriching the engagement of all teachers in their school communities, regardless of location" (White & Reid, 2008, p. 2).

Parallel calls have been articulated in research investigating the benefits of local communities and schools tackling sustainability and climate change. Acknowledging the great deal of work ahead to achieve a satisfactory level of effective Australian school-community partnerships, Flowers and Chodkiewitz promote the potential of partnerships between communities and schools as the catalyst for achieving transformative change "through more authentic and transformative learning experiences in, about, and for the local environment" (2009, p. 71). Likewise, the highly regarded impact of effective partnerships between schools and the broader community emerged as a key finding in research examining Victorian teacher perspectives and practice of sustainability, which identified partnerships as an essential ingredient of enduring sustainability projects in primary schools (Green & Somerville, 2014). Others identify the same imperative to connect schools with communities as part of a concerted effort to not only improve student engagement and participation, but to foster an ethic of care for the ecological and social wellbeing of the communities schools and

students inhabit (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011).

## Methodology

An interpretive, place-based case study methodology framed the study, which asked the question: *How do field based pedagogies inform and shape student teacher perceptions of teaching and learning?* Student teacher viewpoints, including their thoughts, values and meanings about the phenomena of fieldwork became key methodological considerations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Given the significance of the two fieldwork sites within the study, we drew on the conceptual framework of place that took into consideration the assemblage of humans and multiple non-human “others” that make places, and shape pedagogies (Duhn, 2012, p. 99). In acknowledging that place-based fieldwork in teacher education is a relatively under examined field of study, the place-based case study methodology enabled us to explore a “string of concrete and inter-related events” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301) that infiltrated all aspects of the field experiences.

## Methods

Data was generated by two methods. The first was a 10-question online survey developed by the teacher and environmental educator that asked student teachers: to rate and use words to describe the quality of the field experiences; to comment on what they learnt personally and pedagogically from their participation; to identify any new learning about curriculum and teaching/learning outdoors; to indicate whether they would consider working (a) in the field and (b) with community in future practice; and whether the field trips informed and/or challenged their ideas about teaching and learning. The second method involved a documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) of student teachers’ reflective assignments that linked a unit of work (5-6 sequential lessons) and the two field trips using: (a) interactions/observations of children’s learning/participation on *The Living Classroom* day; (b) personal reflections about the challenges/new insights gained from both field experiences; and (c) the potential of community partnerships in future practice.

## Ethical considerations

Student teachers were informed about the research project in the first week of class, and were told the study would commence after the finalisation of all course work and assessment at the end of semester. At that point, student teachers were invited to participate via a face-to-face verbal invitation and an email from the teacher educator. A plain language statement notified participants about the nature of the research, institutional ethics approval, a link to a secure and anonymous online survey link, and assurance of anonymity in any future publications. A total of 14/45 surveys (implied consent) were received, and 16 participants consented to assignment analysis.

## Analysis

Data was analysed using an inductive analysis approach that involved immersion in the details of the data as a way of “identifying, coding, and categorizing primary patterns”

(Patton, 1990, p. 381). Initial analysis involved working with the raw survey data (excel spreadsheet) copied onto a word document as a way of displaying and reorganising it in a format that enabled general exploration of the survey's narrative. The second phase of analysis involved multiple, repeated and more detailed readings of the survey data to identify the broad categories important to participants. Identifying frequent, dominant and significant themes informed the final categorization of three overarching themes most relevant to the research objectives.

## Findings and Discussion

The following three emergent themes are used to explore and discuss pre-service teachers' responses to the field/community/partnership project:

- The Contribution of Field Experiences for Teacher Development
- Contextualised Curriculum and Pedagogies of Freedom, Movement and Diversity
- Community Connections and Future Practice

### The Contribution of Field Experiences for Teacher Development

The data collected as part of this study served as important evidence for gaining insight into how student teachers come to understand the contribution of field experiences for professional development, and for future teaching. Apart from school-based practicum, and one earlier field trip involving student teachers working with children in a local wetland, the study participants had experienced limited teaching and learning opportunities beyond classroom settings. Despite these limitations, their fieldwork responses were explicitly positive, as evidenced by the following descriptors: fun (enjoyable), inspirational, engaging (hands-on), interesting, active, eye-opening, exciting, worthwhile, relationship-building, creative, adventurous, useful, scary, and stressful. Apart from one response that suggested *The Living Classroom* day was not worth it "as we already had one experience of teaching outdoors in our degree" (discussed later), responses were optimistic and directly linked to their professional development and engagement as a beginning teacher, as highlighted by respective survey and assignment reflections:

*The field trips excited me and made me feel keener for teaching and learning. I liked that for the most part it was a 'making the most of the moment' type of scenario because you can only plan so far. It was reinforced to me that learning is a deep concept and multi-faceted.*

*The teaching experiences in the university day showed me about the importance of reflection, alteration and adaption of lessons. I think these skills are essential for a teacher to develop, and I believe that university teaching field day really helped us to progress in our teaching.*

The remarks acknowledge that teaching and learning is indeed, a complex and dynamic process in which teachers are also learners (Woolner, Clark, Laing, Thomas, & Tiplady, 2012), and are important for understanding how student teachers comprehend the multiple dimensions of field-related teaching and learning that incorporates the planned, the impromptu, the uncertain (Sellar, 2009), the unexpected, and the chaotic (Somerville & Green, 2011).

Across the data set student teachers made multiple references to the significance of *where* teaching and learning might occur, suggesting the possibilities of "nearby school grounds for meaningful learning". Others proposed that "tangible outdoor learning



experiences are a more authentic way to teach and learn”. Although some noted, “learning outdoors required greater planning”, others recognised “children love learning outside” and that “any lesson can be taught outdoors and be made meaningful”. Other comments revealed belief about the importance of “tangible learning experiences” as a more “authentic way to teach and learn in landscapes where children are able to construct knowledge around memories and real life experiences”.

Drawing on their *The Living Classroom* day experience, student teachers appreciated the opportunity to adjust lessons where required, which was exemplified in an Aboriginal literacy lesson where modifications were made once student teachers acknowledged children’s lack of engagement:

*While we were briefing children and ‘feeding’ them with the information we wanted them to know, it was clear that they were disengaged and distracted by the environment and the other activities kids were doing. Once we had them up, moving around the grounds on the literacy trail, they seemed far more attentive and focused.*

In this and other instances, student teachers came to reflect on the effectiveness (or not) of their practice, citing opportunities for flexibility and responsiveness that allowed them to move away from originally conceived lesson plans and pedagogies, which they identified as controlling and limiting student participation (Johnston, 2007).

### **Contextualised Curriculum and Pedagogies of Freedom, Movement and Diversity**

Across both data sets student teachers were asked to comment on how, if at all, the field days informed and/or challenged earlier or pre-conceived ideas about teaching and learning. Key among their responses was reference to the role and purpose of curriculum, which many student teachers referenced to as an inflexible aspect of teaching. In the post field day reflections, pre-service teachers remarked on “the potential of outdoor learning approaches for opening up cross curriculum possibilities that allowed for integrated curriculum content”, and were surprised at the “choice and flexibility” they had when conceptualising teaching and learning in outdoor environments. While they understood the importance of adhering to the AusVELS curriculum, the field experiences appeared to open up their capacity to think about curriculum in broad, contextualised and creative ways, as evidenced by one student who suggested “the teaching day provided freedom to create curriculum”. In starting with a fundamental set of questions that framed *The Living Classroom* day’s lesson planning, namely: what is here, what is possible here, and what might learning look like here (Sobel, 1998), students understood “how curriculum can be taught in many different ways”, including “how the outdoors can be linked to vast areas of curriculum”. Myths about classroom-centric curriculum were also challenged, as quoted by one student: “I wasn’t aware we could use the rich resources outside the classroom... that they can become part of the curriculum”.

Others viewed *The Living Classroom* day as an opportunity to take risks by trialling new lessons and approaches previously untried on school placement. While the thought of having to repeat rotational lessons was not immediately appealing, reflections suggest the day not only presented an opportunity to “engage with new curriculum ideas” but that lessons could be adjusted and improved where necessary and in accordance to the “needs of the different groups”. Reflecting on the impact of personal and action-based learning, another student teacher observed: “I can identify that student engagement and willingness to learn is at a higher level when children are active in making their own meaning rather than being fed with information”. In coming to terms with a different teacher-student dynamic once in the

outdoors e.g. shared learning alongside their students, and using student knowledge as part of the lesson, student teachers appreciated that many children knew more about the outside environment than they did. Although initially threatened by this reality, which is a key barrier for teachers' use of outdoor landscapes (Skamp, 2007), pre-service teachers understood local environments as an obvious gateway for bringing children into direct contact with their everyday worlds, for "enhancing children's environmental awareness", and for expanding their own environmentally-oriented teaching repertoires that "direct students' experiences to local phenomena" (Smith, 2007, p. 190). Student teachers told us:

*The field trips allowed me to see how diverse environmental education is.*

*I have a lot more environmental knowledge than I thought. I should give it a go.*

*It's important to give students the ability to interact with the natural environment and learn about different issues and animals that live in a local area.*

*I liked being able to use natural resources for habitat construction that built on student's problem solving and local knowledge.*

In their exploration of the politics and possibilities of a critical pedagogy of place-based education (PBE), McInerney, Smyth and Down ask: Can PBE reduce the degree of alienation that often characterizes students experience of schooling (2011, p. 4)? As soon-to-be graduates, student teachers were familiar with the "the degree of alienation" faced by many children in day-to-day school life. Many understood the classroom as contested terrain where certain types of knowledge were privileged over other types of knowledge (Apple, 1996). For example, mathematics and literacy 'blocks' are a common feature of many school timetables and classrooms, locking teachers and students alike into rigid learning environments. In contrast, themes of freedom, movement and diversity emerged as outstanding pedagogical aspects of *The Living Classroom* day, enabling and requiring children to autonomously move around the outdoor environment as part of learning. By way of example, in preparation for *The Living Classroom* lessons that emphasised living organisms and living systems, e.g. nest building using natural materials, water testing for macro-invertebrates and water quality, a literacy adventure, insects and spider audits, art in nature lesson etc., many (but certainly not all) student teachers factored in opportunities for children to "freely explore and learn at their own rate, in their own way". In declaring the day to be the most rewarding experience they had ever had at university, one student teacher commented:

*It was so pleasing to observe countless children asking questions, actively seeking the answers to these questions, working together and expressing pride in the new knowledge and skills they acquired. Kids were running everywhere - there were students with disabilities who were perhaps the most engaged and excited amongst their peers.*

Several student teachers reported, prior to their *The Living Classroom* lessons, some supervising classroom teachers forewarned them about the challenging students they would encounter. In contrast to these comments student teachers described children who did not ordinarily achieve success in the classroom "as the most involved students on the day who enjoyed the level playing field and could find their place in outdoor learning". Student teachers were surprised to see the extensive levels of diversity amongst the students (culturally, socially and physically), including one student who successfully moved around the activities in a wheelchair. These observations were consistent with the visiting classroom teachers' remarks about the extraordinary levels of participation from children who "did not ordinarily learn well in classroom situations" but who emerged as the most highly motivated learners and leaders once they "stepped away from the conventional classroom boundaries". Student teacher reflections about diverse learners and the need to differentiate or negotiate

the curriculum in response to diversity was compelling, and reinforces the importance of choosing sites that enable open-ended and learner-centred pedagogies that accommodate diverse social needs (Johnston, 2007). Their insights are also a valuable reminder that it is not only children that gain from outdoor learning opportunities: teachers also benefit by observing their students in a different light, and can in response, develop new pedagogies and curriculum that accommodate a range of teaching and learning possibilities (Dillon et al., 2005).

### **Community Connections and Future Practice**

In this final theme we note the catalytic impact of the field-based experiences on student appreciation of the pedagogical value of ‘community’. In the early stages of the MEC subject, student teachers were asked to participate in a mapping exercise to identify elements of community engagement observed or undertaken on practicum placements, or which they might incorporate in future practice. Despite noteworthy examples of classroom reading volunteers, and brief presentations by community organisations including the fire brigade, police, grand/parent guests, kitchen garden helpers etc., very few students identified initiatives that involved long- or short-term school/community partnerships. Similarly, very few had established ideas about future partnership aspirations. Comparable outcomes were reflected in earlier research examining how local schools and communities might collaborate on shared projects, with findings suggesting a shortage of Australian teachers able to think analytically and conceptually about the “kinds of relationships that can be developed by schools with communities” (Flowers & Chodkiewicz, 2009, p. 74).

With these matters in mind, the survey/reflections were designed to create opportunities for student teachers to consider the perceived benefits of collaboration, including their personal experience of the University/Bug Blitz partnership, and its affiliation with the wider community (schools and citizens). According to the student teachers, the opportunity to work with a range of community citizens at the Heart Morass wetlands exposed them to “different insights, opinions and viewpoints”. This included a new understanding of the availability of resources and expertise in the wider community, and exposure to different teaching styles and ideas, as evidenced by their adoption of several lesson ideas into their placement practicum and units of work. The confidence to incorporate new learning ideas into teaching practice speaks to the importance of how the field experiences served as a solid foundation from which they could confidently envisaged new possibilities (Horn & Campbell, 2015).

Similarly, the benefits of developing new connections with a range of community people were well noted (Cline, Cronin-Jones, Johnson, Hakverdi, & Penwell, 2002). For example, from *The Living Classroom* day student teachers expressed the importance of asking pedagogically strategic questions such as: What resources/expertise is available in my community? What community people would I like to work with in the future? From the wetlands experience they noted the advantages of “making connections to some of the organisations that can support beginning teachers”, and recognised “how many people there are to assist with our future teaching”. Others commented on “the degree of passion community citizens brought to the day... showing me how schools and communities might work together”. Many of these aspects were showcased in student teachers’ final assignments where they designed units of work focusing on local projects encompassing citizenship participation through teaming up with Landcare (a local government organisation emphasising land conservation) to create bird boxes in a local park, establishing a bandicoot walking trail with a local field naturalist group, and building a sensory/food garden in a

school with community/parent volunteers. These same pedagogical considerations were captured in one student's reflections:

*I can recognise the importance of using 'experts' to assist with the teaching and learning process. With this in mind I have been able to create a unit of work relating to the concepts of movement, environment and community.*

As part of the data set student teachers were asked: *Would you consider undertaking field experiences/activities in your future teaching?* Overwhelmingly respondents indicated a high level of interest in, and enthusiasm for place/community pedagogies as evidenced by the following comments: "I now feel more confident to take lessons beyond the classroom", and "the field trips helped me form ideas and activities that I will definitely be trying in my future teaching". Having delivered lessons multiple times to children at *The Living Classroom* day, student teachers identified that "outdoor approaches to teaching and learning are not necessarily difficult to perform", "it's not as hard or scary as you think", and "local environments have a high level of potential that provide opportunities to experiment with new ideas and unknown outcomes". Another pointed to this same notion in the survey:

*I learnt new things and met people that I can incorporate into my school/teaching when I get a job. It really opened my eyes to the rich potential for learning outside the classroom, especially in regards to hands on learning with conservation and sustainability.*

We finish the discussion in this final theme by acknowledging student teacher hesitancy in applying new learning. By way of example, one participant cited potential difficulties in schools "where they are not particularly keen on outside learning". These levels of incongruity between confidently developing ideas and curriculum innovations learnt at university, and the existing barriers in schools e.g. rigid timetables with blocked subject areas that hinder rather than encourage new pedagogical approaches, appear challenge student teachers. This tension sits within a broader set of encounters faced by pre-service and graduating teachers when navigating the institutional dynamics of schooling and meeting the bureaucratic demands of "managerialism and standardisation" (Comber & Nixon, 2009, p. 333) that currently dominate and overwhelm the lives of teachers. Perhaps one way forward is to develop greater transparent communication between universities, schools and the Department of Education to share connections about teacher education coursework and current classroom practice as a way of supporting new graduate teachers.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of fieldwork experiences in an undergraduate teacher education program framed by place/community pedagogies. The two distinctive fieldwork experiences discussed throughout the paper created important opportunities for student teachers to consider and apply new approaches to teaching and learning that involved engaging professionally with community citizens, teachers and schools (AITSL, 2015). The two sites – a wetland environment and an outdoor university environment – became critical spaces for embodied teaching and learning. Overall, student teacher reflections illustrate the multiple gains from field- and partnership-based coursework. Data suggests that these experiences broadened student teacher perspectives about where and how teaching and learning might occur, including how environmental education and other disciplines can be integrated across a diverse curriculum. Furthermore, it would appear the place/community approaches to teaching and learning used throughout the MEC subject effectively exposed student teachers to the socio-cultural, geophysical, and ecological phenomena of local landscapes. More broadly, the survey and assignment analysis yielded revealing data about

better understanding the impact of community-based fieldwork in teacher education, especially with regard to student teacher preparedness to teach in local environments, and to engage with community citizens as part of their future teaching practice (White & Reid, 2008). As one student commented:

*I can see there is a lot of value in field trips and even though it takes a lot to organise I believe in their value. I am committed to making this a reality for students in the future. If there is an opportunity, then I am willing to take it (Student teacher reflective assignment, 2015).*

While we identify the problematic nature of student reflections as part of assessment work, namely, responses that correlate with what student teachers believe lecturers might want to hear, we view the fieldwork/partnership initiative and student teacher responses to it as significant for advancing pre-service teacher professional engagement. Such evidence can be seen in student teacher comments that revealed a new-found confidence to integrate people and places into curriculum and practice.

In returning to an earlier student teacher response: “it (the field work) wasn’t worth it as we already had one experience of teaching outdoors in our degree”, we are reminded about how we might engage with our students about the rationale and relevance of field- and community-based work. As the current teacher education program continues to build multiple partnerships with local schools and community groups as part of its teacher education development, (e.g. university classes and course work are routinely undertaken in local primary schools and outdoor environments, and in-service teachers offer mentorship and feedback in the university environment), preliminary analysis of this and other partnership research (yet to be published) reflects significant student teacher approval of partnership pedagogies.

In addition to these matters, the place/community/partnership approaches highlighted in the paper are closely aligned with current TEMAG recommendations that call for robust curriculum design in teacher education programs in Australia based on best practice (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), 2014). From our interpretation of these recommendations, it would appear there are several advantages to exposing student teachers to rigorous and realistic teaching/learning experiences that inspire them to deliver high-quality teaching in their role as graduating teachers. Based on these considerations, the MEC framework had a critical role to play in expanding student teachers’ perspectives about pedagogy and curriculum. By modelling a productive stakeholder partnership – teacher educator/student teachers, Bug Blitz, community citizens, teachers and local schools – student teachers not only came to understand curriculum as dynamic and open-ended, but they also gained new insights into a collaborative project, which one student teacher pronounced as “multiple stakeholders = multiple viewpoints”.

We hope the paper sheds further light on how professional engagement might be advanced in teacher education through place/community pedagogies. In terms of the limitations of this study, we recognise the data as representative of only a small proportion of student teachers. As the study is the first stage of longitudinal research examining student teacher perspectives about their capacity and preparedness to engage with the wider school community, we see it as an important first step. We also view the study as an opportunity to engage in further conversations about teacher education practice that advances professional engagement with teaching networks and communities. On-going research that examines the contribution of place/community and fieldwork pedagogies in early graduate teacher practice will generate a more informed picture.

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