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Practice Teaching in Remote Aboriginal Communities: The Need for Adaptation to the Social and Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT

As part of the teacher education program at Edith Cowan University, a small group of student teachers experience teaching practice in remote Aboriginal communities. In this paper, student teacher perceptions of their experiences on such a practice are presented to illustrate the influence of the practice on their views about teaching Aboriginal children. Through an investigation of journals written during the practice, it is apparent that students had considerable difficulty adapting their teaching to the context in which they were working, particularly in relation to the different cultural and social demands of the situation.

INTRODUCTION

Graduates from teacher education institutions are Education District, the prepared for teaching in a range of situations, but it is difficult to provide practical experience in all situations. One of the problems facing institutions in Perth has been the provision of experience in schools in remote areas of the State. A number of alternative approaches have been utilised over the years, including

conducting instruction in regional centres and distance education. Neither of these alternatives solves the problem of experience for metropolitan students, many of whom, upon graduation, will gain employment in remote or rural schools with significant enrolments of Aboriginal children. The majority of these schools are well over 1000 km from Perth and practice in schools closer to the city does not provide the kinds of experiences appropriate to these schools. Because of this lack of similar schools in the metropolitan area (where the majority of teacher education students attend university), the Faculty of Education at Edith Cowan University conducts three programs to provide appropriate practicum experiences for students. One of these, the Remote Teaching Practice, gives two weeks' experience in nine remote Aboriginal community schools during the second year practicum. In 1996, the practice took place in September in a number of schools in the most remote region of the State in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Nineteen students and five supervisory staff participated in the practice. As part of it, students were asked to keep a journal of their experiences and

perceptions. This article reports some of the outcomes of the practice, viewed through the journal entries and considers implications for teacher education in the future.

ORGANISATION OF THE PRACTICE

Nine schools participated in the teaching practice. There is one other school in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, but it was too remote to take part. The communities in which the schools are located are small, some with community populations of less than 100 and school populations varied from a handful of students up to approximately seventy students. All the schools in the Lands are operated by the Education Department and are a part of the Kalgoorlie district office being situated over 1500km to the south east. To minimise costs, student teachers and staff travelled by Toyota Coaster buses to the schools. Although uncomfortable, this has proved to be a cheap and reliable form of transport in the nine years the practices have operated. We departed early on a Saturday, camped overnight - the first school, Cosmo Newbery - and reached the remotest school on the following Monday morning. The distances are daunting. It is over 1000 km from Perth to the first school, and a further 1000 km to the furthest visited, with over half the distance being travelled on unsurfaced roads.

The populations of the communities, apart from a small number of non-Aboriginal professionals, service and support people, were all Aboriginal. The contrast between the lifestyles of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was quite marked, with the non-Aborigines living in houses typical of urban housing in Perth (and the newer houses being quite spacious), while the Aboriginal people lived in a variety of accommodation ranging from makeshift dwellings to housing of a similar nature to the non-Aborigines. In general, most Aboriginal housing was much more basic than the non- Aboriginal accommodation

There is a marked boundary - culturally linguistically, economically and socially - between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community. The number of student teachers who can take part in the practicum is limited by the accommodation available in the houses occupied by the teachers. There is no consideration that they might be accommodated with Aboriginal people. Although it places greater pressure on the student teachers in relation to their classroom performance when they are living with the teachers, it also gives them a clear view of the daily lives of teachers in the communities, which is an intention of the practice.

Student teachers observed for the first day or so, then commenced teaching, one lesson a day at first, building up to half a day by the end of the practice. This can be a demanding schedule, given the cultural differences in the communities, the different behavioural expectations of the children, and the active social life of the schools while the student teachers are visiting. Prior to departure, a series of familiarisation seminars was held at the university, during which videos were shown, readings discussed and information disseminated on culture, community curriculum demands and appropriate teaching methods. Even so, these vicarious experiences could only mitigate some of the shocks awaiting the student teachers, who had to cope with cultural and linguistic differences, ill-health among the children, absenteeism and life in a very different environment.

The context of the practice for the student teachers was one of performance in another teacher's class, under the supervision of the teacher, the university supervisor and, possibly, the principal of the school. In many respects, it mirrored the experiences reported by Martinez (1994) of a beginning teacher in an Aboriginal community school in Queensland. The restrictive nature of teaching practice, in another teacher's

class, under the gaze of various supervisory personnel and with a performance mark as the outcome, was more daunting than the situation of the teacher studied by Martinez. The difference was in the much more temporary nature of this experience and the greater degree of control exercised over the student teachers. They were not free to experiment with methods and practices and inevitably felt constrained by the degree of supervision and the nature of the classroom context.

In compiling their journals, student teachers were requested to comment on cultural differences that they observed, critical events during the practice (including problems they experienced in both their teaching and after-hours lives), and their thoughts on the situation and their adjustment to it. A list of possible topics for consideration was distributed and the kinds of reports discussed with the group. Variety was encouraged and the issues to be covered was left very open ended.

The student teachers' success in the practice depended very much on their specific situation and on their willingness to adapt. Nearly all the schools were staffed by inexperienced teachers, many of whom were in their first or second year of teaching, a common feature of remote

government schools in the State, (although one which the Education Department is challenging at present with a package of benefits for teachers in these schools in an effort to attract more experienced teachers to them). While the principals were experienced teachers, few had backgrounds in Aboriginal schools and like their staff, were mostly unfamiliar with the demands of the situation. There were exceptions. In one school, a teacher had been teaching in remote Aboriginal schools for several years and in another the principal was Aboriginal. Each school adapted differently to its community, with some making better adjustments than others. This was reflected in the experiences of the student teachers.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The remarks by student teachers about their perceptions of the schools and their communities were influenced by their own backgrounds. Expectations for the appearance of the communities, the pace of life and the nature and health of the children were grounded in their own culture and prior experiences. This was clearly a cross-cultural event for all the student teachers, and some were able to cope better than others. The more mature and more travelled made comparative judgments about the communities and their schools, relating them to other communities they had experienced in

Australia, and, sometimes, with communities in third world countries:

The school and community is a pleasant surprise - clean and relatively orderly, compared that is to some I have witnessed in other parts of Australia

Absolutely gob stopped at all the rubbish lying around. It's as bad as 3rd world countries I have visited.

The student teachers focused on their of the children in the classroom, another reported impressions of the children, who on our arrival were very welcoming and friendly, in marked contrast to their expectations derived from their coursework and readings, which indicated that the children might be shy and withdrawn at first. In only one community was this the case, and that lasted less than half an hour until a barbecue.

Student teachers commented on the "big white smiles", the children's affectionate nature and their willingness to "climb all over" the student teachers. This was rather beguiling because it was very different from the more reticent nature of non-Aboriginal children when making first contact with strangers:

I enjoy the fact the children like to be held, and like the attention. It makes it feel like its special; I'm special and that I have something to offer.

Another related matter which boded ill for education of the children was the early impression gained by a couple of student teachers (and subsequently noted by others) that the schools operated at a much slower pace than other schools in their experience.

In this initial contact, concern at the evident signs of ill-health among the children in some of the communities was a window on the student teacher's general attitudes to the communities and their members. Some couched their views at the state of health of the children in language which expressed concern and sympathy:

There were three children in the class today – I felt very sad that I have 2 healthy, clean children waiting for me at home and there were kids here with scabies, lice, sores and very dirty. I have to remember that I am imposing on their community so I suppose all I can do is grin and bear it and make them feel as though I am here to help and not to dictate to them.

Others - a minority - expressed disgust at the condition of the children, describing their feelings at the sight of running noses, sores and unwashed hair. The concern with health reflects a similar concern in the literature (Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon,

1983; Menzies School of Health Research, 1990; O'Riley, 1980; Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice, 1994). Little appears to have changed in the 16 years since the first of these reports. Throughout their journals, student teachers made observations which give clues to the effects of poor health on the children's educational performance. One noted the lethargy of the children in the classroom, another reported the slow response to directions to get up off the floor and commence activities and several stated that children tended to wind down markedly towards the end of the day. Associated with this may be hearing loss, which could affect the response of children in the classroom (Collins, 1993).

All these behaviours may be symptoms of ill the student health, the solutions to which are beyond the teachers. control of the school, although some schools provided treatment for the children, sometimes in conjunction with the nursing clinics in the communities but sometimes in a misguided revival of colonialism. Paternalistic approaches which impose the values of Western people on Aboriginal families without regard for their own priorities are bound to fail, yet one student teacher reported her actions to impose her the standards on the family of a child who was in the early need of regular treatment.

The tone of the writing implied that the family showed little care for the child because the treatment was overdue, yet the reason for this lateness was the teachers' tardiness returning from a bush trip. It is possible that the existence of stereotyped views of Aboriginal people resulted in an inability to place the of ill-health incident in a more balanced perspective, the communities outcome of which would have been a less teachers' judgmental stance on the parents' response.

TEACHING

The slowness of the response of children may have been due to both ill health and their efforts to influence the behaviour of the student teachers to minimize the amount of work they imposed (Folds, 1987). There was certainly a lack of adherence to the expectations of the student teachers in the early lessons. The children reinforced this pace by refusing to work faster and confounding the student teachers' efforts for greater achievement.

Behaviour was reported to be a problem by most student teachers. Those who reported satisfactory outcomes with regard to behaviour on. The use of appealing approaches to instruction worked well with younger children, as the following extract shows:

I was introduced to the children and then left to it. This gave me the

opportunity to establish myself with the children. I am pleased with the way the children responded - a special surprise in my pocket worked wonders for gaining and maintaining attention.

In her subsequent lessons the same student teacher quickly changed tactics when attention appeared to be slipping and ensured lessons were shorter so that children were under control the whole time. She indicated a marked measure of authority as an early childhood specialist by recommending changes in classroom procedures to the regular teacher who was not an early childhood specialist:

Have discussed with Gina the situation as I see it (from the early childhood perspective and as a well-experienced child carer) the learning outcomes she has requested are too complex for pre-primary children - let alone these children who are experiencing things for the first time in their lives.

The older children were more difficult to control. This was made more difficult by trying to establish routines and behaviours which were expected in schools in Perth. Even the regular teachers experienced difficulty at times, often with particular

children. Misbehaviour ranged from talking out of turn, refusing to sit up and stay on task to throwing things around the room, walking around and fighting among themselves.

Two explanations may be offered for the misbehaviour of the children. These two explanations have been termed "persistence" and "resistance" by Keffe (1988). Persistence refers to the continued influence of traditional Aboriginal culture in the lives of Aboriginal people today. The refusal to be controlled is consistent with reports by various authors of the relative independence of Aboriginal children (Harris, 1980, Hamilton, 1981; and Malin 1989) which is a continuation of traditional autonomy of the individual in traditional society. The early enthusiastic greeting of the student teachers by the children reflected the equality they perceived: rather than regarding the student teachers as of higher status and therefore to be respected, the children considered them to be of equal status. According to this explanation, to exercise authority over the children the student teachers would need to show that they had a right to do so. Given the brief contact, such authority did not exist and so the children refused to obey. In other words, they had not yet gained the children's consent to exercise authority over them, as

Harris (1980) and Malin (1989) suggest is the appropriate path to effective management of Aboriginal children.

Resistance refers to Aboriginal people's opposition to assimilation into non-Aboriginal culture (Keffe, 1988). This resistance to the function of the school was well expressed by Folds (1987) in relation to Aboriginal children in schools not far from these communities. Keffe (1988, p. 72) noted that a range of strategies was used by Aboriginal children to resist the influence of teachers, including "cheeky behaviour", sullen withdrawal, inattention, and absenteeism.

Classroom management was a problem for most of the student teachers and so either explanation could be valid. A mix of both is more likely, given the strong traditional orientation of the communities. There appeared to be few problems in the school with an Aboriginal principal, (which suggests that resistance may have been a major factor), although this was the closest community to Perth, and it could be argued that elements of traditional culture were not as strong.

Given the students' perceptions of equality along and their efforts to resist work, the student teachers were at a grave disadvantage. Despite their knowledge of the implications of resistance and relevant

aspects of Aboriginal culture - such as different world views, talking behaviour and ways of referring to thinking (Harris 1989), - a lack of understanding of the implications of these differences for their teaching was quite exasperating. This was clear from the statements they made, particularly as the practice neared its end:

I shall have to be more strict in the classroom to calm the kids down. The kids weren't even good for Judith so I had buckleys getting them to participate for me. Two days to go.

Under the circumstances, two solutions were attempted: entice the children to go along with the expectations of the student teachers by offering incentives; or use unpleasant sanctions to enforce the will of the student teachers over the children. Both options were evident in the reports in the journals. The incentives worked with younger children but were less effective with older ones, while the imposition of sanctions through the use of management systems such as the Canter approach (Charles, 1992) had some success. Even so, these strategies were derailed by the children's manipulation of them. For example, in one class where points were awarded for good behaviour, the student teacher recorded the following statements

by children who sought to maximise their point scores:

'Mam, I'm writing with my pencil - points?'

'I'm sitting up straight Mam - points?'

'Yeh, I'll rub the board. Points?'

The application of sanctions along the lines of the Canter approach was also circumvented by Aboriginal children who would walk out of school - or threaten to do so - when they were disciplined by the student teachers or the teachers. When this happened to the student teachers it was quite distressing:

The worst thing possible happened during my lesson today, the thing that I was always scared of... One of my students walked out. I hated it, it made me feel like a failure. I know I have seen him and other do it ever since I arrived but I always thought that if they liked me enough they would not. He came back. He was happy then. The reason he left was because I put his name on the board, a consequence of him mucking around. I don't like consequences but when I did not use them yesterday he walked on the desk and went riot. I think that I must find an in between.

In the school with the Aboriginal principal, more culturally - appropriate strategies for handling behaviour problems were practised. When disruption occurred in the classroom considerable time was spent resolving the issue, particularly if it involved conflict between two or more children. All the parties to the incidents participated in working out solutions, while firm discipline was expected and obtained by the teachers. It is possible that the children conformed in this situation because of the greater credibility of the principal and the other teachers, but the student teachers also were able to share in this authority. The school was able to affirm Aboriginality in the processes used, at the same time as reducing the need for resistance, because of this acknowledgment.

Keeffe (1988) identified absenteeism as another aspect of resistance. From personal observation in the past I am able to support the view that resistance certainly has been a significant cause of non-attendance but during the 1996 practice a major cause was the influence of cultural events.

Deaths, law business and important meetings on the future of the communities emptied some schools and resulted in brief admissions of children to others as families travelled among the communities. There is a tendency among some non-Aboriginal

people to refer to such movement as "walkabout" but clearly there were strong social reasons for the families to travel. Even so, the willingness to take children from school with little regard for the continuity of their education strongly suggests a perception of the irrelevance of schooling, which would be consistent with a resistance perspective on the process of schooling.

Whatever the explanation, the variations in attendance had a chaotic effect on the student teachers and their teaching. On some days a student teacher would be confronted with two children, on the next six and the day after another six, of whom three would be new that day. In one school there were no children present for several days because of a funeral. Continuity of lessons was disrupted and preparation of resources problematic because of the fluctuations in attendance.

I had a great day today even though three different 6 year olds turned up from yesterday. My progressive maths lesson from yesterday had to be altered because today's class didn't know what I was talking about.

A consequence of irregular - and often small - attendance was the desire to keep children in school once they had arrived.

This was often problematic as children, particularly the younger ones, would come and go as they pleased:

It seems weird having to chase kids across the school yard to try and keep them here. This behaviour would not be tolerated in the city but it's their way of life out here.

The need to socialise the children into the ways of schooling was much more difficult in these schools than in urban schools. The perceived irrelevance of school and the attractions of life outside contributed to irregular attendance. It could not be argued, however, that there was no regard for education in the communities. Heslop (1996) showed that members of the community were interested in education and were willing to participate in its management. Unfortunately, few of the student teachers were in a position to confirm this interest, and there was little overt participation in most of the school.

CURRICULUM

The student teachers were acutely aware of the differences in standards attained by the children compared with non-Aboriginal children of similar ages in Perth schools. Most of the children were several years below grade level. The contributory factors for the low levels of attainment were a topic of frequent comment in the student teachers' journals, sometimes

inadvertently. For example, one student teacher wrote:

We climbed up a hill just out of the townsite. They all thoroughly enjoyed this, however it was very difficult to get them speaking any English language as they were not within the school grounds. It is as though the moment they walk out through the school gate they can change back into themselves again.

This student teacher's observation touches clearly on an important element of the relationship between the child and the school. Because of alienation from the curriculum, children are unable to "be themselves" at the same time as they fulfil appropriate roles within the school. Learning in a language which is hardly ever used by children outside the school is only one contextual factor responsible for low levels of achievement. Other contributing factors are irregular attendance, the poor health noted earlier and the resistance of the children to a curriculum which is perceived to be irrelevant. These factors, however, may be symptoms of deeper problems. In the school where the student teachers were most impressed with the achievements of the children - the school with an Aboriginal principal - one student teacher reported:

Very relaxed classroom climate but expectations of quality work are enforced as in any school. "White" rules are laid down, hands up, obey teacher, no walking around.

This contradiction - the imposed dominant curriculum succeeding in one context but not another - is best explained by the credibility of the teachers in the school. The student teacher later reported:

[The principal] has turned me willingly into a disciple. I am convinced that we have to teach Aboriginal people not that "white is right" but, to beat the white man [sic] and live in the white mans world you have to learn the white mans way. This school provides a white mans learning style with structure, rules and manners, that does not forget the chns Aboriginality.

The school and the community were allies in a joint project to empower Aboriginal people. This is consistent with the demand by Andrews (1993) for greater understanding of Aboriginal culture and language, as well as the employment of "at least one full-time permanent teacher who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent" (1993:28).

In contrast to the above school, in other communities the imposed curriculum was designed to subject the children to standards of behaviour and attainment that were not perceived to be essential. Principal among these was the demand for cleanliness and neatness, with children being showered and dressed in "school clothes" prior to entering school, then changing back into their home clothes on departure from school. Not all schools showered the children, but the purpose can be questioned: is it to ensure good health, or does it make the children acceptable to the teachers cultural preferences?

The health routine consists of taking off their home clothes (if they are wearing any) then going to the wash room to clean their teeth. Once teeth and toileting is done they get in the shower, and the brown dirt just pours off them! Whilst in the shower they are given shampoo and soap. It is also a good time to check their bodies for sores, boils, etc. The problem with this health routine is that here at school is the only place it happens. I dread to think of how dirty the children stay during their holidays. Even the bigger children have to be socialised to make sure they wash

their hands after toileting or they would not ever bother.

The imposition of the dominant culture without careful planning and consultation with the local community is a recipe for failure. The support of the family and community are essential if school is to be perceived as relevant to the children, as various writers and reports have demonstrated (Castley, 1988; Groome, 1995; Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice, 1994; Watson and Roberts, 1996). Without such relevance children will continue to resist the efforts of the teachers by truanting, being unresponsive in class - (the "Wall of Silence") (Folds, 1987), failing to pay attention and misbehaving. The student teachers reported successful lessons as well as unsuccessful ones. Those which were successful were invariably conducted on topics of relevance to the Aboriginal children (and these were not necessarily only culturally - relevant topics, as lessons on cooking Western food were very popular) or were conducted in relevant contexts, such as trips to the bush. Student teachers who made efforts to relate to the children socially and gain their confidence appeared to have more effective lessons. On arrival in the community one student teacher spent much of the first day playing football with the children. This established good

rapport and respect for the student teacher, particularly as he played in bare feet and shorts!

Children were appreciative of student teachers who attempted to bridge the cultural gap by teaching in culturally - responsive ways. In some cases student teachers incorporated the children's language into lessons, such as teaching body parts using both English and the local language. Other student teachers reported successes by using their own family photos as teaching aids for language development; by building on expressed interests of the children, such as teaching bubble making and colour mixing, and by establishing direct personal relationships with individuals.

Even so, the gulf between the cultures was difficult for the student teachers to comprehend. In the school where one of the teachers spoke the language of the community, a student teacher reported on the apparent failure of a child to learn a concept when communicating in English. When the teacher questioned the child in her first language, it was apparent that she did comprehend the concept:

During maths (an ordering activity) the teacher demonstrated this child's understanding. I had thought she did not have a clue what was

going on, but then he asked her the same question in the language, clarifying for me that she had understood perfectly.

Graham (1988) made the point that attention to language is vital if Aboriginal children are going to learn mathematics effectively. Teachers need to comprehend the complexities of language in relation to mathematical learning if they are to do justice to the children. The inability of the student teachers to carry out such instruction reduced their effectiveness in the classroom.

ABORIGINAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Each of the schools had at least one Aboriginal teaching assistant (Aboriginal Education Worker -AEW) on the staff. These staff members had the responsibility of liaison between the dominant culture and the culture of the children. In their journals, only one of the student teachers reported making conscious efforts to work with the AEW in the classroom. The others may also have done so, but from observations during the practice this is unlikely. By using the AEW to negotiate with the children, explain tasks and seek feedback on problems, it is possible that the student teachers could have reduced the problems they encountered. The one

student teacher who did report consistently on working with the AEW was an early childhood student teacher who is accustomed to para-professional staff in early childhood centres.

CONCLUSION

The group of student teachers experienced considerable frustration and disappointment in teaching in the remote schools but at the same time was exhilarated at the opportunity to participate in the practice. A majority of the 19 said they would apply for remote schools on graduation, which suggests that they had positive experiences during their visit to the schools. Even so, to be fully effective they needed to comprehend the importance of culturally - responsive education which would increase its relevance to the children and reduce the alienation and resistance which existed. They would also need to learn how to locate their teaching within the community so that it had the support of the families. This lesson was learned by some of the students but not by others. For most of them the principal method that became dominant in their repertoire was the imposition of the dominant curriculum by force or by bribery through rewards and enticements, approaches which led to resistance on the part of the children and contributed to non-attendance, misbehaviour and boredom. The student

teachers were unaware of this, however, intimating that responsibility for the lack of learning rested with the children, who were claimed to be much more difficult to teach than non-Aboriginal children. Rather than seeing the problem as the imposition of a largely irrelevant and oppressive curriculum, the student teachers in effect blamed the children for failing.

The results of the evaluation of the teaching practice through the students' journals have implications for teacher education, both at the pre-service level and when teachers are being appointed to schools in traditionally - oriented Aboriginal communities. The main requirement is for strategies to incorporate relevant content and methods into the curriculum. Communication with members of the communities to ensure acceptance of the curriculum and the active involvement of those members in the education process are significant steps. Student teachers need to be taught appropriate processes for working with Aboriginal Education Workers and members of the community. One early childhood specialist student demonstrated that these skills can be readily acquired and contribute to improvements in the quality of education. It is essential to avoid a learning context in which the teacher sees it as his or her duty to enforce strict discipline while

transmitting the dominant curriculum to unwilling subject children in total isolation from the community's values, understandings and practices.

An approach to teacher education that develops awareness of the processes of domination and subjectification is highly desirable for Aboriginal education. It is clear that the application of "normal" teaching methods in Aboriginal schools contributes most effectively to domination and results in alienation of the children. Teachers need to share authority in the classroom and develop strategies to integrate the children's prior learning into lessons in ways that support the dignity and self-direction of Aboriginal children.

The evaluation also reaffirms the value of Aboriginal teachers for Aboriginal schools. The credibility of staffing schools with teachers from the communities is much greater and cultural responsiveness is assured.

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