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# Success Stories From an Indigenous Immersion Primary Teaching Experience in New South Wales Schools

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A federal report released by the Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA, 2009), entitled *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia*, highlighted the inequality that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students based on a restricted access to resources, issues of isolation, staff and student retention, and cultural differences and challenges. In New South Wales (NSW), the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in 2003/2004 undertook their own review of Aboriginal education in NSW Government schools that revealed significant concerns about the outcomes being achieved by Aboriginal students in NSW DET schools, confirming the more recent FaHCSIA (2009) findings. In 2006 the NSW DET implemented the Enhanced Teacher Training Scholarship Program (ETTSP) to empower 20 final-year education students to successfully engage with Indigenous students in schools and their wider community during their internship period. Using themes, this article explores the experiences of 10 University of New England scholarship holders at the end of their final year of teacher training and immersion/internship experience in 2010. The article puts forward useful recommendations for both teacher universities and students intending to teach in schools with high Indigenous student populations.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal education, teacher professional development, pre-service teacher training, teacher retention

There has been much political debate at national and federal levels acknowledging the gaps that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student engagement, retention and educational outcomes in government schools. A report conducted by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 2006 concluded that the longer Indigenous students remain in school, the deeper the educational concerns of engagement, retention and educational outcomes become. A federal report released by the Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) (2009), entitled *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia*, further highlighted the inequality that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This is based on restricted access to resources, issues of isolation, staff and student retention, and cultural dif-

ferences and challenges. The vast research into Indigenous education agrees that there are many factors that contribute to the concerns shared for Indigenous education outcomes, but this article will focus on perhaps the most critical factor to student learning success – the teacher (Hattie, 2003).

Teacher preparation and preparedness have been the focus of much research connecting quality teaching and learning, retention, and teacher satisfaction (Halsey, 2005; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; MCEETYA, 2006). Further, successful recruitment and retention of teachers

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to rural and remote schools Australia wide has been problematic for all states and territories (Roberts, 2003; Vinson, 2002). Research reports that these problems may be accounted for by the fact that many of the teachers recruited to work in remote Indigenous communities are new or recent graduates (Cape York Institute, 2007; Heslop, 2003). While they may possess the skills essential to meet the department's education requirements to successfully teach subjects in primary schools, many may lack the necessary life experience, maturity and cultural awareness vital to recognise and adapt to their new community's social and cultural landscape. Hampered by the tyranny of distance and lack of resource support, social and professional, many new recruits to these schools leave within the first teaching year, resulting in all states and territories reporting difficulties in staffing and retention of teachers to rural and remote schools (Halsey, 2005; MCEETYA, 2006).

In recognition of the ongoing staffing difficulties experienced by education departments Australia-wide, many cash-based and priority placement initiatives have been favoured as a solution to the recruitment of teachers to rural and remote schools. While these incentive schemes may prove successful in the short term, the reality appears to be that the incentives fall short of fulfilling the cultural capital and personal resilience vital to retain teachers in these communities. To empower new teachers with the cultural awareness necessary for the Indigenous community and to prepare them for the social and professional isolation *prior* to being professionally placed as a teacher, immersion programs have been embraced by a number of education departments with success. There is an increasing evidence base to support the success of immersion programs and internships translating into increased application and retention in regional and remote schools (Halsey, 2005).

The New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in 2003/2004 undertook their own review of Aboriginal education in NSW government schools that revealed significant concerns about the outcomes being achieved by Aboriginal students in NSW DET schools, confirming the more recent FaHCSIA (2009) findings. One of the recommendations from the review suggested an immersion program for final-year education students during their internship period of 10 weeks in DET schools identified as having 'high Indigenous student populations'. Based on the review's recommendations, the NSW DET implemented the Enhanced Teacher Training Scholarship Program (ETTSP) in 2006. The program aims to encourage, educate, and empower 20 final-year education students state-wide to successfully engage with Indigenous students in schools and their wider community during their internship period. Initial evaluation of the ETT project success has reported that the first cohort 'appear to be more confident, competent and resilient for working in this area of education than is the norm for beginning teachers' (Labone, Long, &

Cavanagh, 2009, p. 6). The scholarship entitled the students to

- undertake their 10-week internship placement at a NSW Government school the DET deemed as having 'high Indigenous student populations'
- financial aid of \$1,500 related to educational costs (e.g., books in their final year)
- a one-off payment of \$6,000
- undertake two HECS-exempt units in Aboriginal Education in their final year
- attend a full-day training program hosted by the NSW DET
- a guaranteed permanent teaching placement at a NSW school the DET deemed as having 'high Indigenous student populations' upon graduation.

## Methodology

This article reports on the internship experiences of the second UNE ETTSP cohort of 10 final-year education students in 2010. The DET recruitment process as dispensed by participating NSW universities, spanned a 4-month turnaround period between August and November. All state-wide ETT applications were short-listed and applicants required to present in Sydney for interview. Successful applicants were then notified by the DET of their scholarship offer.

The University of New England, Armidale, was invited to participate in the NSW DET's ETTSP in 2007 to encourage interested final-year education students to apply for the scholarship. As a rural university, UNE is strategically placed to successfully engage with this program as most students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) come from rural backgrounds, and the School of Education enjoys a close relationship with the UNE Oorala Aboriginal Cultural Centre. As a result, UNE was able to extend its support to the successful recipients in the form of

- accessing Aboriginal mentors within the UNE's Oorala Aboriginal Cultural Centre throughout their final year of study
- the Bachelor of Education (Primary) coordinator volunteering support in the form of individualised and/or group de-briefing and discussions (online wiki, personal phone calls, e-mails) while on internship
- postinternship evaluation of their experiences and exploration of the ramifications for a successful transition into professional teaching practice
- the Bachelor of Education (Primary) coordinator visiting each recipient at their school, in addition to the Professional Experience Office visit, while on internship.

Now in its third year of participation, the UNE enjoys a majority share of the 20 scholarships on offer each year. In 2010, UNE again was successful in harnessing 17 of the 20

available scholarships. Linked to this success is the degree to which the coordinator of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) prepares the third-year students for the scholarship. The coordinator widely publicises the scholarship opportunity in August to the third-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) cohort, and holds a number of information sessions to interested students on the nature and expectations of the scholarship requirements. Additionally, the coordinator and a third-year academic tutor voluntarily provided guidance and mentoring support to students in the preparation of their scholarship application.

The scholarship recipients were required to undertake a modified final year of study and undertake two units in Aboriginal Education. The first unit was tailored to offer a unique balance of history, current educational trends, Aboriginal program initiatives, and cultural challenges that exist for teachers in schools and the wider community. A focus of the unit's learning objectives was the deliberate intention for the recipients to interrogate, identify and challenge their own understandings and attitudes towards Aboriginal people through reflective journal practice and readings. The second unit required the recipients to design, implement and evaluate a community project involving their students and the wider community. The project needed to be grounded in Aboriginal history, used as an education tool, and continue once to recipient's internship period had expired. The recipients worked collaboratively with the school's Aboriginal Liaison Officer and an Aboriginal elder in the wider community where appropriate.

The three male and seven female scholarship recipients were typically 21 years of age, and had all originated from rural backgrounds within the NSW New England region. The majority of them had not had extensive contact with Aboriginal communities, while three reported they had previously volunteered their time assisting local Aboriginal members in their community. The DET provided the recipients with a choice of geographical region they preferred to be placed and in all cases, their choices reflected the existing family and social networks available to them. This meant that the recipients were able to relocate themselves during the internship period without living and accommodation costs. Internship and eventual permanent placements were evenly split between the mid-north coast and areas within 400km from the mid-north coast. One internship placement, however, was located on the western side of the NSW and Victorian border.

Through a survey of four semistructured informal questions, the participants were asked to reflect upon their involvement with the ETTSP and how it assisted their personal and professional transition into professional teaching. The questions asked included:

- how they believed the ETTSP scholarship opportunity enhanced their transition to teaching
- what was the most challenging experience gained from the ETTSP scholarship opportunity

- in what ways did the ETTSP scholarship opportunity culturally enhance their understanding of working with Indigenous students in schools
- what suggestions would they put forward for future recipients of the ETTSP scholarship opportunity.

For each question, students were asked to respond from both a personal — and a professional — growth point of view. The survey data were then analysed to identify trends and themes emerging from the respondents. It was evident that the recipients had benefited greatly from their involvement with the ETTSP opportunity, and this article proceeds to discuss in brief each of the themes that emerged from the survey.

## Results

Students were asked to discuss how the ETTSP opportunity enhanced their transition to teaching from a personal and a professional viewpoint. From an individual viewpoint, a shared theme was one of self-discovery and revelation of personal resilience. Participants reported that they were able to enjoy success in a context external to their comfort zones, one they that had not been subject to before as epitomised by these statements. All names and locations used are pseudonyms.

The ETTSP made me get out there and actually do something that I never expected I would do. I went out to Penrose Hill — the last place I thought I would ever visit let alone live there. The scholarship really encouraged me to leave my comfort zone. Though I believe I am a strong person, the scholarship opportunity has made me even stronger. You never know how strong you really are until you are called upon. I have been able to find positives and solutions in situations that I would not have deemed possible before. (Teacher 2)

I feel that this scholarship has taken me outside my comfort zone and pushed me to explore avenues that I would usually shy away from. Such experiences included working with Indigenous communities. However, this scholarship allowed me to learn more about myself as well as Aboriginal people, their culture and their way of life through real world experiences. (Teacher 3)

Another important realisation students discussed was a personal awareness of their own cultural awareness and social orientation towards Indigenous people. The students reported a greater appreciation of the disadvantage and plight of Indigenous people through their contact with Indigenous families and community whilst on Internship.

I feel even the concept of 'listening' has shaped into a new meaning for me since embarking on this scholarship through particular units at UNE and through meetings with Aboriginal people. I truly believe that through listening to Aboriginal people with an open mind, my transition into teaching has been enhanced personally and professionally. (Teacher 2)

The ETT scholarship provided me with opportunities to develop awareness about Indigenous issues in relation to education in our society. Coming from a small rural town, I was surrounded by small minded, negative opinions. I feel that this Scholarship has allowed me to be confronted by Indigenous issues first hand, enabling me to form my own opinions. (Teacher 3)

My eyes have been further opened to how some Aboriginal peoples still have a right to be angry. At my school, I saw first hand the archaic and destructive visions of a Principal that deliberately stood against change. This directly affected the Aboriginal students at the school. Attempting to overcome this was very challenging but rewarding as well. This experience provided me with the opportunity to be an active force for reconciliation. (Teacher 2)

When asked to share how the ETTSP opportunity professionally enhanced their transition to teaching, the strong theme of building self-confidence to manage classroom situations emerged.

The scholarship made me less 'afraid' of the ten-week internship I did at Blackburn South, a school with over 75% Indigenous student enrolment. Otherwise, I would have simply done my Internship at a local Catholic school. My ten weeks were tough, but at the end of it I felt so much more prepared and ready to go out and teach anywhere. The ETTSP scholarship gave me the opportunity to realise that this is what I truly enjoy and want to do: teach Indigenous children. (Teacher 5)

The ETTSP opportunity offered me trials and tribulations I don't believe I would have received anywhere else regarding the experiences that schools, students and communities can throw at you. The opportunity made me work harder than I have ever had to before. This has greatly prepared me for my future career in education because now I am more aware of what the actual job entails. (Teacher 2)

This scholarship has ensured that I have the necessary skills to close the learning gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. I feel that I have learnt and gained experience in differentiating learning for Aboriginal students. As well as making Aboriginal learning relevant, engaging and authentic. I also learned to value community input into curriculum development. (Teacher 3)

All students reported having a range of challenging experiences that were valuable in their development as a person and a teacher. Students reported that the most personally challenging to them was managing their own personal opinions and pre-conceptions about Indigenous communities.

The most challenging experience involved having to put personal issues aside whilst facing low-socio economic problems in schools such as poor nutrition, lack of sleep, skin infections and other complex issues. This involved being placed outside of your comfort zone and having the choice to either sink or swim. It was a matter of putting my personal opinions aside and allowing time to listen to

others, and develop a true understanding about particular Indigenous issues. I am such a better teacher for the opportunity. (Teacher 3)

From a professional point of view, the challenging experiences focussed around differentiating the curriculum, using different pedagogical practices, and involving the community.

My biggest challenge on prac was learning how to deliver content in an effective manner and differentiating learning for all students. At the beginning of my Internship in a 100% Aboriginal school I was troubled by the fact that so many of my lessons were failing. The strategies I had successfully used on other prac placements just didn't work. This was incredibly frustrating! I soon learnt to differentiate my learning and teaching for them and use my teaching strategies differently and more effectively. (Teacher 3)

My challenge was motivating staff and various community members to participate and help start and continue the community project and integrating more Indigenous perspectives and experiences relevant to the local area where my internship was carried out. Basically finding and encouraging people in the community to come in and help out with community projects was much harder than I first thought. (Teacher 4)

I found that sometimes my behaviour management strategies were not as effective as they had been in other primary schools. As a result I very quickly learnt to follow through and seek support from other staff. Another challenge was acknowledging that it was the behaviour not the particular child that I found challenging, unacceptable and at times hard to deal with. (Teacher 3)

All students discussed how the ETTSP opportunity personally enhanced their cultural awareness of Indigenous issues on a variety of levels. All students reported the growth in their appreciation of Indigenous culture as a privilege that impacted upon how they viewed Indigenous communities and the issues they experience.

I have had an incredible opportunity thrown my way to engage, participate and communicate with Aboriginal people within different contextual situations. I have been able to go into the community, talk to Aboriginal parents, respected Elders and learn the Mangulugatti language and aspects of their culture. I have learnt about totems, eaten bush tucker, been involved in regional cultural days and participated in cultural events. Without this scholarship I would have never experienced such amazing cultural experiences. I feel I have grown as a person and have learnt a huge amount in a short time. Because of the opportunities given through this scholarship, I can now communicate confidently with Aboriginal people in an effective way and am able to utilise Aboriginal cultural perspectives in the classroom. (Teacher 3).

I found through the ETT scholarship that being a teacher working at a school with high Indigenous populations does not simply mean teaching my students. Prior to my

practicum I knew this, however this became more apparent to me when I was heavily involved with the community and different aspects of the community. I found that due to this strong community enhancement, I was able to relate more confidently to my students. (Teacher 6)

The ETTSP scholarship made me realise even more that even though Indigenous kids have unique needs that need to be catered for, they are still just kids. Kids are kids wherever you go. I found that I loved teaching Indigenous kids and would much rather teach them than mainstream kids. I love their humour and their 'cheekiness.' I love how they still come to school most days with a twinkle in their eye and a grin on their face, even though for some, their home may be quite dysfunctional. The behavioural challenges tested me on many occasions, but I got through them. My patience was tested many times, but with Indigenous kids, I found I had all the time and patience in the world. (Teacher 5)

On a professional level, the students reported a greater appreciation of the important roles the wider community, the Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) and the school community have in ensuring a quality school experience for all involved.

The scholarship opportunity gave me the opportunity to see a range of cultural differences first hand, and how they are greatly contrasted against our own which was very important. For example, the tight Kinship relationships between the Indigenous families was something that I had only read about. To experience it first hand with some of my Indigenous students coming and going on an almost weekly basis truly amazed me. In my own selfish, professional opinion, it made my teaching difficult. However, I now feel I understand the cultural benefits and implications of such ventures. The most important thing I learned is not to judge others or situations at face-value especially when you do not have all the facts. (Teacher 2)

Professionally I found through the ETT Scholarship that working at a school with high Indigenous populations that within the school structure, communication is so important for success. Something so simple, yet really hard to get happening. I was lucky at my school. If there is support, increased shared information of techniques and general communication between the teachers, students, the ALOs, the Principal, parents, caregivers and the wider communities, anything is possible and all students can succeed. (Teacher 6)

The ETTSP provided opportunities for myself to consider and implement informed decisions and practice culturally specific sensitivities and protocols when communicating with various members within the school, parents and other community members. (Teacher 4)

It was evident that all of the participants in the ETTSP scholarship benefited greatly from having their internship based at a school with 'high Indigenous student populations'. Their shared experiences were predominantly positive, excluding one student whose only negative experience was in the form of a lack of support due to the

'narrow mindedness' of the school principal. Of main concern was the principal's opposition to a number of initiatives designed to specifically improve the quality of the school experience for the Indigenous student population at his school. The student was able to learn greatly from this experience, highlighting the pivotal role schools have in the education and empowerment of coming generations with the principles of reconciliation and the role of principals in supporting or hampering initiative.

All students were vocal and encouraging on the advice they would give to student teachers considering teaching in schools with 'high Indigenous student populations'. On a personal level, facing personal fears, being open to change, and allowing yourself to be a student to be taught by your own students were foremost in the advice.

Don't let anything hold you back. Be open to new challenges and block out negative comments and opinions from those who are closed minded and racist. Also, learn to step back from a particular situation to see multiple perspectives towards a particular situation. (Teacher 3)

Choose a 'tough' school for the Internship, by that I mean, choose a school you wouldn't ever see yourself at. If you can handle a 'tough' school, you know then you can handle anything. (Teacher 5)

My suggestion would be not to 'judge a book by its cover' and not to listen to other people's prejudices when talking about Indigenous communities. At the beginning of the year, I found that through living at college I was in a community where there was a lot of prejudice. I would like to suggest to anyone thinking about teaching in a school with Indigenous students to not listen to other people's prejudices, and not be pressured into gossiping about different things that may occur in the school community. (Teacher 6)

Be willing to be posted absolutely anywhere in the State. While over half of our group got their first preference for teaching the rest of us got posted in very different spots that are remote. I strongly believe that those of us posted to remote places will get a better experience by teaching in communities that have a much higher Indigenous student population. (Teacher 1)

Get out there and do something that you would never have done before. Put yourself in an isolated area or an Indigenous community and experience a new way of teaching and living. You can only gain from the experience. (Teacher 2)

On a professional level, the advice was centred around networking and effective communication with others.

Develop a high communication level with your teaching colleagues at school and the other people on the scholarship. It is amazing how much you will support, guide and be there for each other. (Teacher 3)

Liaise and communicate with as many professionals, teachers and Indigenous members of the community as often as you can, these are the people that offer support, ideas, guid-

ance and help with the implementation and effectiveness of your community project. (Teacher 4)

Be very tactful and sensitive because Aboriginal community issues are complex and need to be respected. Be friendly in your approach and non-intimidating. The way you hold yourself and your communicative manner is picked up by Aboriginal people. I was told by the AEO that I am timid but courageous because I get in and get things done. I need to think about how I was being timid and how that affected my teaching approach. (Teacher 3)

Definitely staying on top of everything regarding your teaching is the most important thing I have learned. With the benefit of hindsight I would have been very proactive in finding out what units I had to teach, what I would have to program and I was already programmed for me, getting scope sequences and timetables for all KLAs as well as policy documents regarding the school's teaching and learning practices. You really need an overall view down to nitty gritty details, regarding your Internship in order to do the best job possible. (Teacher 2)

Be a doer, act on your ideas and effectively communicate them with your Principal. In the end they have the last say. (Teacher 3)

## Discussion

The analysis of the 2010 cohort of the UNE ETTSP participants clearly shows how they gained valuable insights, lessons and outcomes from carrying out their internship placement in schools with 'high Indigenous student populations'. On a range of levels, all students reported an increase in confidence and professional competence when managing the learning and social needs of students in their classrooms.

The ETTSP program provides a comprehensive approach to Aboriginal education through the unique balance of theoretical preparation with a targeted practical engagement in schools with high Indigenous student populations. The program is also complimented by the fourth-year NSWIT mandated unit, Aboriginal Education for all pre-service teachers, and participants undertook two additional Aboriginal Education units tailored especially to prepare them for their upcoming internship. The units were designed to confront and force students to think about their personal biases, prejudices and preconceptions surrounding Indigenous peoples, and how this will impair their student's learning and professional role as a teacher. All students made comment about how valuable this process was in preparing themselves mentally for the teaching tasks ahead.

The students learned very quickly first hand that the success of their role as a teacher in their school was heavily influenced by the rapport and relationship they had with other teachers, the principal, the students, their parents/carers, but most importantly, with the wider com-

munity. As one teacher summarised, 'Teaching Indigenous students differs greatly from teaching in any other society: it is much more fun and family-based' (Teacher 1). They appreciated the subtle differences needed in their own teaching approach and attitudes necessary to reach and teach Indigenous students in their classroom when compared to other mainstream classrooms.

The dominant themes that emerged from the participants' experiences indicated strong personal and professional growth in three areas: (a) developing a sense of personal resilience, (b) understanding their own cultural awareness and social orientation with Indigenous people, and (c) attaining a sense of professional confidence in the classroom. The participants also reported four main challenges that emerged from their involvement with the project. This included being confronted by their preconceptions of teaching Indigenous students and more broadly, of Indigenous communities they had prior to their placement; managing the pedagogical and curriculum differences necessary to successfully teach Indigenous students; the power of the community as a tool to enhance greater learning outcomes; and how to best negotiate classroom and individual behaviour of Indigenous students.

An area of the ETTSP project that may capitalise on the overall teacher/student experience is, where possible, building in a component of continuity so that the relationships developed during their placement with their class, colleagues and the wider community continue at the end of their internship. The NSW DET may consider strategically placing students into schools where, post-internship, they are able to remain at the school as an ongoing teacher and continue with the communities of engagement that consolidate their professional experience and community relationships. Further, as the ETTSP program provides a more comprehensive approach to Aboriginal education, broadening the scheme through a DET/university partnership to provide more students with a similar opportunity, may only prove beneficial for all involved in remote and/or schools with high Indigenous student populations.

## Conclusion

The ETTSP scholarship holders all developed a 'heart' for teaching Indigenous students and a heart for Indigenous communities more generally. They shared a strong sense of optimism and enthusiasm for their future. Contact has been made with the 10 recipients since graduating, and all report that they have settled into their first teaching placement confidently and with a sense of being culturally 'well prepared'.

The successful UNE recipients of the ETTSP scholarship have become excellent ambassadors for the DET initiative, and provide evidence that a placement during their internship to schools with high Indigenous student populations can empower and professionally enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching to their students. It

would appear that if more new teachers were subject to such experiences prior to graduation, then the possibility exists to positively address the poor retention rate of new teachers to schools with 'high Indigenous student populations'. If the DET-funded program was to cease, based on the ongoing economic cut-backs experienced in the tertiary sector and the real costs associated with the ETTSP initiative, the program would not be viewed as economically viable for a university to fund and match the program independently. It is therefore hoped that the DET initiative continues in years to come based on the wealth of knowledge and learning that only experience can provide.

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