

# Teacher education in a remote community: Learning on the job

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As part of the Commonwealth-funded project, *Growing Our Own*, Charles Darwin University, in partnership with the Darwin Catholic Education Office, is delivering a preservice education degree program to remote indigenous communities. This paper employs a case study approach to investigate how the program is operating in one of the communities, using examples from the Wadeye local context. In remote community schools, there is a high turnover of staff each year. In addition, there are very few indigenous teachers, although nearly every classroom has an indigenous Teacher Assistant, particularly in the bilingual schools. There are other connected issues, such as school attendance statistics and providing role models for young people.

In order to build a more sustainable staff and increase the number of indigenous teachers from within the local community, lecturers from Charles Darwin University travel to five remote communities each week of the school year to deliver preservice teacher education to small groups of teacher assistants. Because they already work in classrooms every day, their ability to take a whole day for their university studies is only possible because of cooperation from their mentor teacher and the school. The program is designed to link closely with the daily work the teacher assistants are already doing in their classrooms. The learning tasks and assessment items are planned to complement and enrich their practice in the local environment, and to reposition them from being seen as teacher assistants to teachers. In this truly work-integrated learning model, the students' daily work is essential to their studies. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2010, 11(3), 57-65)

Keywords: Australia; indigenous; remote; teacher education

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## INTRODUCTION

It has long been of concern to educators in general, and Northern Territory schools in particular, that there are very few indigenous teachers in our schools, and even fewer accessing teacher training at Higher Education providers (Fordham & Schwab, 2007). In addition, remote schools in the Northern territory are notoriously difficult to staff in a sustainable way. It is hard to attract quality experienced non-indigenous teachers, and to retain them for more than a year, as they can feel isolated and exhausted in the bilingual and bicultural environment (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006; Taylor, 2010). This situation is hardly a recipe for developing strong programs and relationships with the remote communities who see people come and go like 'shooting stars' (M. Mullumbuk, personal communication, August, 2009), promising much, but delivering little in the long term.

There seems to be a relationship between these ingrained issues and poor school attendance in these communities. If the students do not see the school, its English speaking staff and its curriculum as relevant to their emotional and educational needs, then the incentive to attend is reduced (Lewthwaite, McMillan, Renaud, Hainnu, & MacDonald, 2010; Martin, Marsh,

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McInerney, & Green., 2009), and lacking strong social pressure to go to school, the children often vote with their feet. Northern Territory indigenous children's poor attendance record and low academic achievement has been well documented (NT Board of Studies, 2008; NT Department of Education and Training, 2008).

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (2006) recognized that universities have a role in collaborating more closely with schools to increase the confidence of indigenous students in the relevance and attainability of higher education qualifications. The total number of indigenous students in the teacher training courses at Charles Darwin University is small, and many of those do not intend to teach in a remote location (that is, out of Darwin). Attracting indigenous students from remote locations is even more difficult as they have little access to resources such as the Internet, libraries, computers and other students. They are not able to travel and stay in larger centers to attend courses internally. Completing a professional experience placement in another school would be a daunting task for an individual to organize, given their extensive family commitments, and lack of resources and confidence. This is especially true for those who have rarely left their communities apart from short trips for health reasons. Therefore:

There is recognition that the approach to indigenous teacher preparation and recruitment needs to change. We need to be strategic, purposeful and bold in our approach to indigenous teacher preparation. A new creative and practical approach is essential. (Elliott & Keenan, 2008, Appendix A, p. 2)

#### CASE STUDY: THE GROWING OUR OWN PROJECT (GOO) IN WADEYE

In 2008, Charles Darwin University (CDU) and the Northern Territory Catholic Education Office (CEO) gained funding through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. It is a Quality Teaching Package which essentially aims to attract, develop and retain teachers, and embed, at the local level, good teaching practice to strengthen the existing education workforce, especially local indigenous staff. It operates in the six remote communities, including Wadeye, in the Northern Territory which have a Catholic School.

The overarching goals of the program are:

- (i) To empower indigenous educators to join culturally relevant ways of being, knowing and doing with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge; and
- (ii) To empower non-indigenous teacher mentors to understand culturally relevant indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing and infuse these with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge to strengthen opportunities for children's learning. (Elliott & Keenan, 2008, Appendix A, p. 5)

One of the communities involved in the *Growing Our Own* program is Wadeye, a tribal indigenous Catholic community of more than 2500 people situated on the western edge of the Daly River Reserve in the Northern Territory. The CDU lecturer takes a 50 minute flight to Wadeye in a twenty-seater, twin engine plane. During the wet season, Wadeye is cut off by road for up to five months, and air flight is the only option for travel, although food and supplies are delivered to the township each week by barge.

The complex and sophisticated social, economic and cultural systems of the indigenous inhabitants of the region remained relatively unaffected up until the establishment of contact with non-aboriginal influences in 1935 when the Catholic Church founded a mission. Services provided by the Mission attracted people from the tribal groups within the region, an increasing number of whom took up residence at Wadeye. These people were always considered as visitors by the traditional owners of Wadeye, the Kardu Diminin, and had none of the rights that go with the ownership of Wadeye land. This same attitude prevails today.

The community of Wadeye comprises seven tribal clans, each of which speaks a different language, although the dominant language is Murinhpatha. This is also the language spoken by the indigenous staff at the school. Wadeye is a proscribed community under the Northern Territory Intervention so alcohol cannot be bought or consumed unless a license is obtained. Of the population of approximately 2500 people, 1500 are aged less than 25, and 700 of these are of school age. The majority of school-aged children do not attend school, despite various initiatives by the community and the school. There are 500 people aged 25-50 in Wadeye and only 100 people aged over 50. Between 60 and 80 babies are born in the community each year. It is estimated that the population of Wadeye will double in the next 20 years. There are 144 habitable homes in Wadeye, with an occupancy rate of approximately 16 persons per dwelling (Gray, 2006; Taylor, 2004).

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School, (OLSH) Wadeye, is a bilingual school. Murinhpatha and English are both used as languages of instruction at the school, although Transition (school entry year) is almost solely in Murinhpatha, and English is integrated thereafter. Most people in the community can speak basic English, including the children. There are two indigenous qualified teachers working in the primary school classrooms, although there are at least four others in leadership and other non-teaching roles in the school, including one of the deputy principals.

#### WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

Models for the professional experience component of a teacher training course have varied over time and between institutions. An apprenticeship model was prevalent for most of the past century until it was replaced by courses which separated the academic education studies from the school placement component.

Currently, teacher education providers are mindful of the need to prepare their students in a more holistic way from the beginning of their training.

A broader professional learning experience in teaching to prepare teachers to work in school and their communities is currently being advocated. Preservice teachers need to be familiar with the realities of day-to-day teaching and engaged from the outset in the development of integrated learning experiences in which pedagogical theory is simultaneously taught, absorbed and put into practice. (Ure, Gogh & Newton, 2009, p. 13)

In accordance with this view, the delivery of the *Growing Our Own* program harnesses and blends the assistant teachers' extensive classroom experience and expertise with new knowledge about teaching and learning to meet course learning outcomes in practical ways relevant for the school and community context. All of the *Growing Our Own* Program

students were already working in their schools as Teacher Assistants (TAs), many of them having been there for a long time – more than twenty years in some cases. These people have extensive knowledge of the local culture, language(s), families and environment (Maher, in press). In the bilingual schools, where school instruction takes place in the child’s first (non-English) language initially, with English being gradually introduced over the years, they are an integral part of the classroom when the teacher speaks only English. They are also the main link between the families and the school.

When these TAs became Preservice Teachers and students in the Bachelor of Teaching and Learning nearly two years ago, their ability to integrate their studies into their day-to-day work as Teacher Assistants was exploited, and they are now gradually repositioning themselves in the classroom and the school as a teachers rather than assistants. This has resulted in developing authentic, culturally appropriate ways of progressively documenting student learning outcomes to meet CDU course and teacher registration requirements.

The CDU lecturer visits the site once a week (by plane) for the whole school year (typically 40 weeks) to deliver the academic course content, as well as to oversee the preservice teacher’s planning and to liaise with the school staff. The lecturer works closely with the school coordinator and also with the Catholic Education Office coordinator. The school coordinator works with the group when the lecturer is on site, and then supervises the students’ study and practical work for the rest of the week. The school coordinator also plays a crucial role in being the link between the coursework and the classroom practice, working closely with the mentor teachers to ensure that the preservice teacher completes thorough planning and receives feedback on lessons (see Figure 1).

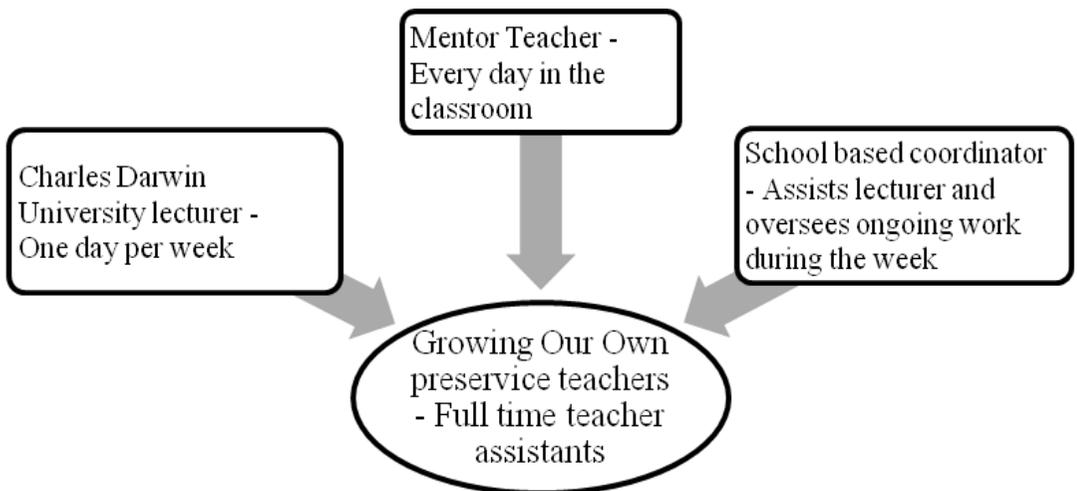


FIGURE 1:  
Support for the preservice teacher

The mentor teacher has a special role in the project which has, as one of its aims, “to empower teacher mentors to take leadership in understanding culturally relevant indigenous ways of being knowing and doing and to infuse these in contemporary curriculum and

pedagogical knowledge to strengthen opportunities for children's learning" (Elliott & Keenan, 2008, Appendix A, p. 5). In other words, the mentor and the student teacher should learn culturally relevant knowledge and practices from each other, embedding them in the pedagogy and curriculum in the classroom. This collaborative model of preservice teacher professional experience is well documented in the report prepared by Associate Professor Christine Ure and colleagues for the Victorian Council of Deans of Education and the Victorian Institute of Teaching (Ure et al., 2009). Orell (2004) notes that the most effective work placement programs are those which involve true partnerships between the various stakeholders. She contrasts the short term aims of some work experience programs with a more transformative ethos which "emphasises learning, and adopts a long term view, seeking benefits for all parties... Potentially, this ethos epitomises *Learning Organisations* and leads to authentic, ongoing, transformative partnerships integrating work, curriculum and research" (p. 77). GOO would meet the criteria for the latter category with its 'two ways' philosophy and practice.

So where other students in the BTLP access the course via 'learnline' on the Internet or by attending lectures and tutorials, the GOO students access the course by the lecturer coming to them, in situ. If this option were not available, it would be highly unlikely that they would be able to move to Darwin to attend classes because of their complex commitments to their families and community. Internet access is patchy and not available in most of their homes, so online learning outside of the school is also impossible. Therefore, the GOO project has sought to overcome some significant barriers for students who would otherwise have little or no chance of becoming qualified teachers.

## RESULTS

Three of the four preservice teachers at Wadeye who started the course have continued until the end of the second year. They will all have completed the requirements of the degree by the end of this year or early next year, and will probably be employed in their community school as qualified teachers once they are registered with the NT Teacher Registration Board.

The students' own evaluations, which are captured twice each year as part of the accountability procedures of the project, illustrate clearly the way that this model of workplace-integrated learning has resulted in a paradigm shift for them in their status in the school and classroom. They see themselves as teachers now, rather than teacher assistants, and are more confident that their cultural knowledge has a real and meaningful part to play in the education of the children in the community.

I sit together with the teacher instead of with the kids.

We work together to plan lessons. I would like to do more planning with my mentor teacher.

I really love doing my course within my community. It has improved my skills and helped me to be a better teacher.

I like doing more study and I need to continue to study next year so I can become a qualified teacher. I enjoy doing lots of activities that I can do with the kids to help them learn.

For the students in the classrooms, we can now teach them in both English and Murinhpatha using our own culture.

We wrote about bush tucker and we taught this to the students from the big book we made.

I am happy and looking forward to next year. (Ebbeck, 2009)

The lecturers, coordinators and mentors have confirmed that, for them, it has definitely been a two way learning process.

Lecturer 1: I have learnt so much during my involvement in Growing Our Own. It has been a privilege to work with such generous and gentle people who are passionate about improving their own prospects and those of the next generation.

Lecturer 2: I feel that I have learnt far more that I have taught.

School-Based Coordinator 1: All the students involved in Growing Our Own Project have shown a keen interest in their studies. They have been very generous in sharing their stories and hopes and dreams for the future with those of us who have been fortunate to work closely with them. This year has been an amazing time of learning for me. (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009)

One particular example of 'two ways learning' which valued the preservice teachers' existing extensive skills and knowledge was the bush tucker book which followed a visit 'to country' by the students, lecturer and school coordinator. As part of the Technology and Design unit, as well as Science, Art and Literacy, the students researched and wrote about their local bush tucker in English and Murinhpatha. They illustrated each entry, designed the cover and bound the book themselves. Then they each planned and took a lesson in their classes using the book as a resource, incorporating their local knowledge into their professional experience in the classroom. So integrating the academic theory, pedagogical knowledge and skills into the everyday classroom alongside the indigenous ways of knowing and being has been fruitful. Nakata (2008) discusses the issues around teaching and learning for indigenous students and suggests that we need to build on their existing knowledge and capacities, that they need much stronger support, and that curriculum and assessment design should take greater account of the challenges that they face. The *Growing Our Own* program has attempted to address some of these issues (Slee, 2010).

Not only do the students acknowledge the change in their own mindsets, but others in the school and from CDU have noted the transformation as well.

.... has grown in confidence as a result of working with the children. It is evident that she is 'thinking' like a teacher – in her planning and flexibility. She is enjoying teaching (Mentor Teacher).

I believe the *Growing Our Own* project has been invaluable in empowering the local staff in our school. My assistant Teacher, ....., has developed good skills and has taken responsibility for the students' learning (Mentor Teacher).

I think the *Growing Our Own* project is a positive opportunity for indigenous people to train to gain teaching qualifications. I love working with my student (Mentor Teacher).

Integrating the preservice teachers' academic studies with their daily work in the classroom has resulted in a real change in their own and others' attitudes towards their status in the school. After several sessions with the lecturer dealing with inclusion in education, one of the preservice teachers went back to her classroom and collected some work samples from a student. She evaluated those, and then approached the school's Special Needs Coordinator with her concerns about the student. She explained that he was not achieving anywhere near the standard of the rest of the class, and used the work samples to illustrate her point. The Coordinator was extremely impressed.

This is the first time I have had an AT or indigenous teacher come and speak to me about student concerns. I was very impressed with the information she left with me and with the work samples she provided me with. She certainly deserves to be congratulated on her confidence and initiative in this manner. (Kristy West, personal communication, 28 April, 2010)

The *in situ* delivery means that the preservice teachers can stay in their own school communities, enhancing the sense of belonging and trust. The development of strong relationships between the lecturer, the school coordinator, the mentor teacher, the student and the community is crucial in creating meaningful links between the learners' two worlds (Ladson-Billings, 1995), those of traditional knowledge and cultural systems, and the informed pedagogical theory and practice of today.

## DISCUSSION

The *Growing Our Own* students at Wadeye are still passionate about their goal of becoming qualified teachers and role models in their community. They have made many sacrifices to continue in the program in spite of a complex set of other commitments. There is considerable diversity amongst the indigenous students enrolled in *Growing Our Own*, and the basis for customizing the content is recognition of their unique social, cultural, linguistic and cognitive characteristics (Elliott, 2009).

The highly supportive and flexible model of delivering the program on site allows the preservice teachers to incorporate their professional experience into their everyday work in the classroom, a very successful work-integrated learning model. It allows us to build on their already abundant set of skills and knowledge, as well as their rich cultural heritage.

Current levels of low school attendance, inadequate resource provision and high staff turnover in remote Northern Territory schools are unacceptable. Indigenous teachers are best placed to bring relevant cultural knowledge, competence and skill to the students' learning in schools in remote indigenous communities. These teachers provide a conduit between the local community and schools. Frequently, indigenous staff members are the only long-term employees of remote schools, although far too often they are only employed as teacher assistants. Local indigenous teachers know their students. They live their culture and know the families of the children they teach (Maher, 2009).

The *Growing Our Own* program is attempting to respond to a social need in remote indigenous communities in Australia's Northern Territory. Capitalizing on existing social and kinship networks, the program seeks to create learning communities, which provide mentoring and peer support, while also providing mutual cultural understanding. Personal indigenous knowledge is infused with contemporary teaching learning theory and practice. While Standard Australian English language literacy is developed and strengthened, local language is nurtured and

supported. Knowledge is constructed collaboratively, between students, mentors, school-based coordinators, lecturers and peers (Elliott & Keenan, 2009).

*Growing Our Own* is resource intensive, and the final results are not yet known, although it is expected that most students will complete their course within the next year. It remains to be seen whether it is sustainable in the long term, and whether it successfully addresses the issues discussed in this paper. The effectiveness of the program may initially be measured by the number of successful graduates of the current course and whether the program is ongoing. In the longer term, an increase in the number of indigenous teachers in our schools and teacher education courses, and a corresponding improvement in learning outcomes for the students in their schools, would be clear indicators of success.

The program is dependent on deep and effective relationships between a diverse range of stakeholders and partners. Mutual trust lies at the core of these relationships. The strengths of individual preservice teachers have been identified and built upon and the program promises to enable them to work as effective practitioners at the conclusion of the course. The shift from the role of teacher assistant to teacher is well underway through this innovative approach to work integrated learning.

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