

The Northern Territory Teaching Schools program: Exploring the promise of partnerships in regional professional experience.

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Abstract

One of the key challenges for education in Northern Australia is attracting and recruiting teachers who can respond to the challenges of the region at the start of their careers through professional experience in the region. For pre-service students in regional locations such as the Northern Territory these challenges include coping with the distance and isolation, and high staff turnover. In response to these challenges there are initiatives to improve teacher quality and promote remote and regional areas as options for study to employment pathways.

This paper describes and discusses the *Teaching Schools* Partnership, developed in 2006, involving teacher-employing authorities in the Northern Territory and Charles Darwin University to provide professional experience.

Utilising Wenger and Lave's notion of '*Communities of Practice*' as a theoretical framework this paper analyses the challenges of offering professional experience with the resultant partnership practising, mutual engagement and joint enterprise of both parties.

The paper will outline the current theoretical and conceptual principles and the framework of the *Teaching Schools* Partnership and describe practices that have made this collaborative successful. Close examination of this partnership reveals a need to extend the present outlook and potentially engage at a broader scale with increased focus on community.

Keywords: *Teaching School NT*; pre-service teacher education, remote, pre-service professional experience, partnership, teacher professional development

A Time of Change in Teacher Education

In today's neo-liberal contexts, universities and K-12 schools face the challenge of pursuing excellence and equity in a climate of accountability and competition. For universities there is focus on expansion of access to higher education to increase student enrolments from underrepresented groups and; increasing government emphasis on deregulation and free markets regarding student enrolment (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). For schools there is increasingly held requirements for transparency and public accountability for student learning outcomes (J. Smyth, 2008), also demanding that schools are more self reliant (Bradley et al., 2008) and enterprising, and culminating in school performance as reflected through national assessment examinations.

For teacher education, theory and practice have been primarily considered as separate entities. Responsibilities for explaining theory, the abstract and the nomothetic, was assigned to academics. Responsibilities for explaining and supervising practice, the situational or the idiographic, allocated to practicing classroom teachers. An imbalance of focus on theory versus the practicum has been slowly identified as a problem with students who, through their actions, put greater value on the highly

emotive and experiential in-school experiences and lesser value on the contribution of theory to their development (Brady, Segal, Bamford, & Deer, 1998). For students to become effective classroom practitioners a strengthening of understanding of the interplay between theorizing and practicing as it relates to engaging with the real problems of the workplace needs to be fostered. It can be strongly argued that the intersection between theory and practice and the valuing of both is the fulfilment or nexus of development of critical thinking and professional decision-making. Whether it be theory-based practice or practice-based theory, the capacity to make professional judgment is critical to both perspectives (Holt, Mackay, & Smith, 2004).

Amidst this theory-practice dichotomy have been tertiary advisers, whose roles were to oversee the students whilst on their professional experience. Along with a power imbalance between university and schools their value and perceived effectiveness became increasingly questioned. A combined mentor teacher and tertiary advisor supervisory practice (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) was often perceived as a daunting experience of ‘direct, overt surveillance’ (Smyth, 1993) and could often be aligned with the Foucaultian metaphor of the *panopticon* with a preservice teacher being watched and judged by many eyes from many angles, or that of constant and universal surveillance. Thus in these times teacher graduates were asked to work under conditions that provided little opportunity to share and practice new learning. The performance based approach served to stymie the perspective of many who chose to enter the profession.

A questioning of the status quo within the educational arena brought about by increasing resonance of constructivist theories has had extensive implications for practicing and preservice teachers. In tandem with this paradigm shift was a focus on changing community and industrial demands, the stability of organisations as described by Schön in his work on the transformation of the stable state (Schön, 1971), and the re-emergence of focus on reflective practice identified and expanded upon (Schön, 1983).

Contextualising education practices and making connections to the social aspect of education (Vygotsky, 1978) has seen a body of research and associated literature develop in which Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is situated in social contexts and is achieved through interaction and practice with others with similar professional interests. A more recently coined concept of *Communities of Practice* espoused by Wenger (Wenger, 1998) prescribed the elements of ‘mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire’ and implies that individuals learn by engaging with and contributing to their communities, and that community members learn and refine their practice through reciprocity with newcomers. This reciprocity is evident (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) in preservice teacher professional experience, with contemporary practices embracing community consultation, mentoring and coaching, and shared knowledge. Engagement with community brings into play active and relevant concerns from varied and involved stakeholders. As such the broader community then becomes comprised of the academic disciplines and departments that contribute to the curriculum; the expectations of industry and professional associations and standards; and the students themselves.

Acknowledgement and adoption of constructivist over behaviourist approaches in education has seen a shift to towards inquiry-oriented learning (Zeichner, 1983) and viral changes in education practice across numerous decades. Research and publications in the last decade have provided insights, rhetoric and reflection on the changing landscape of the practicum in our schools and tertiary institutions (Le Cornu, 2010; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Ure, 2009; White, Bloomfield, & Le Cornu, 2010; Zeegers, 2005). An internship, or work-integrated learning (WIL), has been introduced into various professions to enhance work readiness and offers a unique experience for developing professional behaviour, strengthening its base in constructivist learning pedagogy. Changing contexts have seen marked changes to the approaches taken for preservice teacher placements and have moved from a traditional approach to those that meet the needs of the schools, the workplace and the universities in ways that emphasize collegiality, authenticity and reciprocity (Le Cornu, 2010). This is played out largely through the development of learning communities that include preservice teachers, mentors and

teacher educators.

While traditionally, learning has been held within the domain of the universities, emergent trends have seen a shift to increasing value being placed on the local knowledge, or what Michel Foucault has called “le savoir des gens” or the people’s knowledge, (J. Smyth, 2008). This shift however, has brought with it a perceived imbalance between the academic and more practical concerns of external stakeholders, amplifying the theory – practice divide. The disparity between knowledge within the university, identified as Mode 1 knowledge, and practical knowledge grounded in the workplace, or Mode II knowledge (Symes & McIntyre, 2000) has identified inherent tensions around the value of learning as a whole. Questioning of the values of intellectual, research based discipline knowledge, as opposed to a shared, societally useful knowledge, has caused some friction within the higher education sector.

For lifelong learning the *spirit* of learning in universities can be harnessed and such learning is valued and celebrated. This Mode 1 knowledge can provide deep learning with profound and reflective contemplation being one of the valued outcomes (Symes & McIntyre, 2000). Academic knowledge alone, however, has been impacted in the present neoliberal economy with funding cuts to academies and universities. A move to increased involvement with industry has become non-negotiable.

Mode II knowledge capitalizes on applied learning, is performance based and outcome driven. Mode II learning is enacted outside the traditional university settings and employs a cross-disciplinary approach to sound pedagogy. This approach supports the student as an active learner, and scaffolds and equips learners to know what to do in professional practice, and to know how to work productively with acquired theoretical knowledge. This socially distributed knowledge to learning has become acceptable in higher education sectors and is widely incorporated in learning practices in various disciplines. The nature of Mode II learning, however, by its nature is undertaken in a diverse range of sites or settings and brings with it high costs that may be viewed as unsustainable in the long term. Such knowledge can well meet two related needs: those of individuals as lifelong learners and those of organizations whose mandate is often linked to notions of learning organisations.

Partnerships

This blend of knowledge acquisition highlights a need for exploration of sustainable partnerships (Peters, 2001) that can reflect industry expectation and provide attention for the needs of students as active participants of learning communities. Increasingly over the last decade universities have looked beyond the domains of the university and the schools as providers of a total experience and have ventured into partnerships with schools, educational jurisdictions and the broader community to provide greater connection between education and social expectations. This has supported the notions that

Good professional teachers connect the cultures of school and home to make sense of knowledge production and how learning always takes place within the social milieu of diverse communities involving factors of class, race, Indigeneity, gender, disability and the like (Ball & Tyson, 2011).

In Australia various forms of ‘partnerships’ between higher education and schools have been in place for decades with partnerships mainly designed to assist in the task of preparing new teachers for the profession. The nature of these partnerships has evolved since their introduction, moving from a *transactional* to *transformational* perspective in which the roles and responsibilities are enacted differently.

Transactional Partnerships

In transactional partnerships the roles of the partners serve particular and distinct purposes. The university traditionally places emphasis on theoretical aspects whilst the schools contribute as the

practicum site and the place for interaction with students, teachers and families. This pattern tended to consolidate the beliefs of a theory-practice dichotomy and reinforced a power imbalance between Higher Education and the community. These types of relationships may be reviewed as pressures as governments in Australia target improved teacher education programs through increasing the school-based practice component (Toomey et al., 2005). Interestingly these moves mirror developments in the UK in the Teacher Training Agency and in the US through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Transactional exchanges alone in partnerships are not considered sufficient to achieve the mutual benefits that are expected of an “engaged” university and partnership industry and/or community. Meeting these demands may be resolved by entering deep transformational partnerships rather than the more superficial transactional exchanges.

Transformational partnerships

An emergence of transformational partnerships, different in purpose, nature, and strategies from the more commonly practised transactional partnerships is now becoming more evident in educational settings. They are based upon genuine engagement and a focus on common goals and mutual benefits. Community engagement and leadership are key elements in transformational partnerships and can facilitate ways in which higher education institutions can think and work differently with other institutions, organizations, and groups to achieve mutual benefits. Table 1 below summarises these benefits.

Table 1

From	To
Being cooperative	Being Collaborative
Involving knowledge transmission	Involving knowledge creation
Being supervisory	Being critically supportive through mentoring and coaching
Being theory driven	Being based in practice

A commissioned report, *Practicum partnerships: Exploring models of Practicum Organisation in Teacher Education for a Standards-Based Profession*, (Ure, 2009) outlines transformational partnership approaches for professional experiences in a selection of Victorian universities and provides working models of how these are tailored for the contexts of the stakeholders. Ure explains that ongoing/enduring partnerships between schools and higher education providers support future work in the school – they enable other things to happen. These may include: negotiated experiences can be enabling beyond the classroom; reflection on practice can be linked to the preservice teachers capacity for innovation and development in and beyond the school and; each stakeholder within the partnership can become a learner with that learning being reciprocal, valued and transforming.

Such transformational partnerships in teacher education are now evident across many states and territories. At Victoria University they are described as reflective praxis inquiry and viewed as fundamental to the ethos of learners (Eckersley, Williams, Cacciattolo, Kruger, & Cherednichenko, 2008). The University of South Australia describes them as Learning Circles in the report *Learning Communities, Learning Circles*. Learning Partners schools in Sydney (White et al., 2010) make use of a Tertiary Mentor to facilitate both pre- and in-service teacher professional learning. A similar approach is being used at the University of Ballarat in their Building Partnerships project (Zeegers, 2005) where Community Coordinators, from various backgrounds, act as a link between the university

and the school and school cluster and are considered a vital feature of the programme. Charles Darwin University, along with Central Queensland University have adopted a Teaching Schools model, (Allen, Butler-Mader, & Smith, 2010; Smith & Lynch, 2006) where a Teaching Schools Coordinator acts as a liaison between the university and Professional Learning Leaders in schools. The focus of in-school tutorials and assessment tasks are negotiated jointly, with an understanding that there is a combined responsibility towards the outcomes of the course.

Local context, practice and partnership approaches

Enrolling students at CDU undertake professional experience across a range of approaches to their placements. These typically include urban, rural and remote settings, with varying degrees of academic and in-school support. This paper explores the nature of existing practicums offered as part of preservice teacher education at CDU and includes students from various settings. The context for the participants in this paper is particular to the Northern Territory, and focuses on the way in which teacher education coursework and professional experience is undertaken.

Below provides detail of one approach used at CDU for the provision of professional experience. This approach focuses on internally enrolled students who undertake their professional experience within the *Teaching Schools* partnership. In addition some background and detail around other forms of professional experience being undertaken as part of CDU teacher education coursework is provided.

Teaching schools Partnerships

Premised on the philosophical perspectives as outlined by Lave and Wenger in 1991, Charles Darwin University entered a partnership with the Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory, and developed a *Teaching Schools* agreement whereby urban and internally enrolled students undertake professional experience in designated schools. In using this approach conversation and consensus around outcomes for preservice teachers whilst on professional experience are mutually addressed and subsequently enacted. Partnership schools have a Professional Learning Leader (PLL) who coordinates mentoring staff and preservice teachers. The PLL also liaises with the university based Teaching School Coordinator in the development of assessment tasks required and the provision of onsite tutorials. This partnership has been in place since 2006 and has fostered ongoing conversation and mutual support between the NT University and the majority of the urban-based schools.

The *Teaching Schools* project is a partnership between Charles Darwin University (CDU) and the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (DET). The partnership aims to graduate high quality teachers who are work ready when they commence their teaching careers. *Teaching Schools* evolve as schools of excellence as they provide preservice teachers with developmental guidance and support from quality mentor teachers. The partnership allows schools to have continued input into teaching course development and review.

Remote placement

Teacher shortage in remote locations has highlighted a need for an understanding of the context of remote location prior to recruitment action post graduation. Study options for interested students can be extended to offer opportunity to undertake Professional Experience in remote locations. The opportunity for non indigenous student to undertake professional experience in Indigenous

communities is supported in CDU courses with a sense of "white" teachers do and can experience and acknowledge the value of Indigenous life and Indigenous epistemologies (McKenna, Cacciattolo, & Mahon, 2011). Teacher education programs in remote and Indigenous settings can create opportunities for preservice teachers to undertake authentic practicum experiences. While limited opportunities and limited financial support is provided, these short periods of professional experience may supplement quality teaching and impact teacher employment and retention in Indigenous settings.

Remote Partnerships

Acknowledgement of the needs in remote communities for quality teachers and a respect for the local Knowledges has seen a many faceted and tailored approach to CDU teacher education. The needs of learners and teachers in remote communities have been addressed in the development of 3 approaches for students undertaking CDU teacher education courses.

GOO (Growing – our – Own)

As described by Elliott and Slee (2010) a two-way community engagement partnership was developed jointly between CDU and Catholic Education office NT (CEO) to develop a Growing-Our-Own (GOO) project. This approach was aimed at teacher assistants who live and work in remote Indigenous Catholic Community Schools of the Northern Territory who wished to achieve teacher qualification level. As outlined by Maher (2010) the potentially exhausting nature of the bilingual and bicultural context often results in high staff turnover. The students' learning ultimately suffers and the consistency of educational practice in these communities is compromised. This partnership sees CDU lecturers travel each week through out the school year to remote locations to provide academic support on site, in collaboration with staff within the local school and community. Elaborating on this approach Giles (2010) points out that the benefits include: *in situ* delivery, meaning that the preservice teachers can stay in their own school communities, enhancing the sense of belonging and trust; and that the Indigenous Assistant Teachers' cultural knowledge is the foundation on which the program content and embedded teaching theory will build.

RITE (Remote Indigenous Teacher Education)

Modification of the Remote Area Teacher Education program (RATEP) program (York & Henderson, 2003) introduced in Queensland in 1990, has resulted in the Remote Indigenous Teacher Education (RITE) project starting initially in three sites in the Northern Territory. The RITE program, hinging on intersystemic collaboration, and high retention numbers of graduate students in remote locations, has provided a strong model for the development of an NT version of this Queensland approach. This approach sees DET lecturers reside and work *in situ* in remote communities providing theory and professional practice guidance for the entire school year.

ACIKE (Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education)

The ACIKE initiative, (CDU, 2012) launched in 2011, is a collaborative partnership between Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and CDU that aspires to transform innovative teaching and learning for Indigenous peoples across Australia. A blend of the culturally responsive approach to teacher education used at BIITE and the flexible delivery options at CDU offer a comprehensive and empowering mode of learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. ACIKE Indigenous students study block coursework together on site at the townships of Alice Springs and Batchelor NT, and then undertake professional experience in their community as part of their life's learning journey. Students are acknowledged as having both Indigenous knowledges and ways of learning; and Western knowledges and ways of learning, known as 'both ways' learning. (Harris, 1994; Ober & Bat, 2007). (Harrison, 2005). Discussion of Harris' *Both Ways* education (Ovington, 1994) draws conclusions about fundamental differences in Aboriginal and Western world views, embracing indigenous and non-indigenous culture and knowledge for pedagogical purposes. For many students this means validating new knowledges and learning with their elders.

CURRENT SITUATION: Teaching Schools partnership

The Teaching Schools Project continues to align with current research and Government agendas. The Northern Territory and Australian governments are engaged through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in pursuing substantial reforms in education under the productivity agenda. The heart of this is enhancing the quality of our teachers to improve student outcomes.

In 2007 the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training tabled its report on the inquiry into teacher education entitled *Top of the Class*. This report stated that teacher education is no longer solely a university issue, but a shared responsibility between the industry and the university. A key finding is that preservice teacher readiness is linked to both the length and the quality of the practicum. The Teaching Schools Project continues to be guided by the findings of this report to ensure that schools build up investment in the profession.

The DET/CDU Teaching Schools Project is a key vehicle for the development of preservice teacher preparation in the Northern Territory. The project aligns DET and CDU project targets with closely aligned outcomes:

Outcomes for DET:

- x Work ready graduates demonstrating the Professional Graduate Standards for graduating teachers in the Northern Territory within DET school contexts
- x Teachers engaged in evidenced based professional learning with opportunities for post graduate qualifications

Outcomes for CDU:

- x Ongoing, guaranteed placements for preservice teachers.
- x Professional Learning Leaders (PLL) provide personalised, collaborative support to PSTs
- x PSTs attracted to study at CDU with increased support
- x Quality mentors in schools

DET (NT) and CDU provide financial support to the project. The funding supports schools in a number of ways. Examples include:

- x Administration of the project within the schools (including release of mentors and PLL from classroom activities);
- x Delivery of professional learning and professional development for mentors and PLL

The graph and table below indicate the growth in Teaching Schools. There are currently 45 Teaching Schools with the prospect of more schools joining the project in 2013. These schools represent 87% of the total number of schools in the Darwin and Alice Springs regions.

Note: DET schools and participating private schools make up this total number.

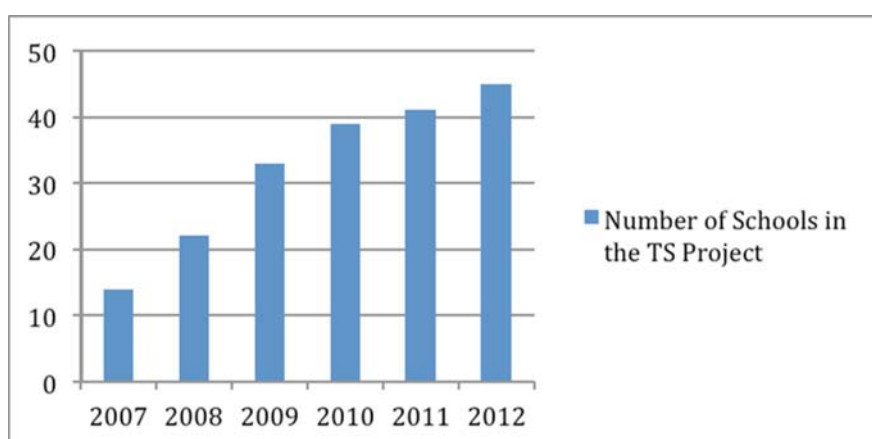


Figure 1 Number of Teaching Schools in the Project

Table 2

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Number of Schools in the TS Project	14	22	33	39	41	45

The Teaching Schools Project is a key driver of high standard preservice teacher’s education in the Northern Territory. The partnership has four main pillars that constitute the foundation principles:

- Development of work ready graduates who are effective staff members from the commencement of their career with the ability to plan for and implement strategic direction that will result in improved student outcomes.
- A common language of instruction by CDU and Teaching Schools based on the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework, the Australian Curriculum and leaning design principles.
- Extended practicum experiences where the preservice teacher embed themselves in the context of schools and have the opportunity to ‘learn by doing’ the work of an experience teacher through modelling and coaching principles.
- Professional learning and development for mentor teachers and Professional Learning Leaders is ongoing to develop professional practice in line with the Northern Territory Professional Standards for graduating teachers, the National Standards for Graduating Teachers and DET direction.

A positive outcome has been evidenced for both organisations within this partnership. For the university, there are increased enrolments and higher thus increased numbers of work-ready graduates. For DET there are increased opportunities for recruitment with a strong sense of understanding what the teacher graduates will bring to the profession.

The graph and table below shows the numbers of preservice teachers from CDU education courses placed within Teaching Schools.

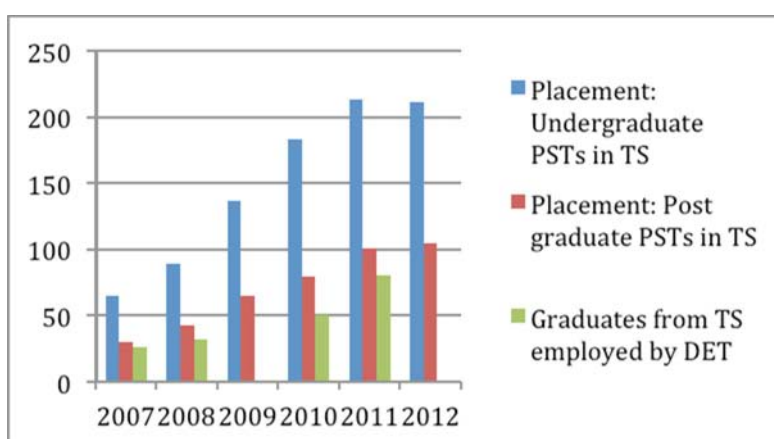


Figure 2 Placement of CDU preservice teachers in Teaching Schools.

Table 3

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Placement: Undergraduate PSTs in TS	65	89	136	183	213	211
Placement: Post graduate PSTs in TS	30	42	65	79	101	104
Graduates from TS employed by DET	26	32	N/A	50	80	-

NOTE: The numbers of graduates for 2011 employed by DET does not include those on contracts or graduates who may not have commenced employment with DET until after the beginning of the school year. 2012 figures will not be available until the start of the 2013 school year.

The project continues to receive positive feedback from school leaders who have agreed on the significant impact the Teaching Schools project has had on the quality of the graduate and the effectiveness of the mentor teacher.

Discussion

The Teaching Schools project has seen substantial benefits for both organisations in the partnership. These benefits include in increasing numbers of teacher graduates and graduate who are ready to enter the workplace within the context on NT schools. Participating Teaching Schools take pride in the quality of support and mentoring that they provide and the return on their investment is celebrated in employment of the graduate teachers.

The increasing numbers of student enrolling in undergraduate and postgraduate courses has seen an impact on the sustainability of this project and the extent to which it can be sustained in its present format. With increasing enrolment numbers the demand on mentoring teachers has become substantial and has had an impact on the numbers of mentoring teachers available to provide consistent quality of in-school support. The transient nature of the population and teaching staff in the

NT has also had an impact on the availability of quality mentors.

The number of schools that remain to enter the partnership in these regional locations is limited, and existing schools are at capacity with preservice teachers. It is clear that DET and CDU should look for future opportunities from the Australian Government to secure joint ongoing funding in an effort to sustain effective practices.

The opportunities to extend this partnership to other forms of professional experience are worth consideration. These may include an extension of partnerships that may look to: support remote placements; establishment of support hubs within the existing Teaching Schools; and exploration of non-government schools agreements to sustain preservice teacher development.

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