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When the Wattle Comes Out, the Turtles are Ready”: Success of the Enhanced Teacher Training Program

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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). The successful recruitment and retention of teachers to rural and remote schools Australia-wide has been problematic for all states and territories (Vinson, 2002). Education departments have implemented a number of immersion programs with success (Halsey, 2005) in order to empower new teachers with the cultural and classroom awareness necessary for teaching in Indigenous communities. In 2006, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (DET) implemented the Enhanced Teacher Training (ETT) scholarship program. This paper reflects on the experiences and retention of the first five teachers to graduate through the UNE ETT scholarship program, three years since successfully entering the teaching profession in indigenous communities in NSW.

Introduction

The disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student engagement, retention and educational outcomes in government schools has been subject to much political debate at national and federal levels. A report conducted in 2006 by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) concluded that the longer Indigenous students remain in school, the deeper the educational concerns of engagement, retention and educational outcomes become. This fact was supported three years later by the 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*. Aspects such as the restricted access to resources, geographical isolation, poor staff and student retention, and cultural differences and challenges seem to underpin the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous students when compared to non-Indigenous students. Another crucial aspect that affects the quality of Indigenous student participation and retention in schools is the professional and intra-personal qualities of the teacher (Hattie, 2003).

In October 2011, a three-year Commonwealth funded project entitled the *Indigenous Cultural Competency (ICC) in Australian Universities*, was completed by *Universities Australia* and the *Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC)*. The project aimed to embed Indigenous cultural competencies at the university level so graduates were confident and competent when working with members of the Indigenous community. The project's concept of 'Indigenous cultural competency' provides a highly relevant context to the ETT project, as they define it as:

the ability to understand and value Indigenous perspectives. It provides the basis upon which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may engage positively in a spirit of mutual respect and reconciliation.

[\(http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/page/policy-advocacy/indigenous-issues/cultural-competency/\)](http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/page/policy-advocacy/indigenous-issues/cultural-competency/).

The low retention of teachers and students within Indigenous communities may be accounted for by the fact that many of the teachers recruited to work in these remote contexts tend to be new or recent graduates (Cape York Institute, 2007; Heslop, 2003). Whilst they may possess the skills essential to meet the NSW Department of Education & Training (DET) department 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 new social and cultural landscapes. The issues of geographical isolation, lack of resource support, and social and professional challenges mean many new recruits leave their placement within the first teaching year. All states and territories report difficulties in the staffing and retention of teachers in rural and remote schools (Halsey, 2005; MCEETYA, 2006).

In 2003/2004 the NSW DET and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) undertook their own review of Indigenous education in NSW government schools. Significant concerns about the outcomes being achieved by Aboriginal students in NSW DET schools were revealed. 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 (ETT) Scholarship Program (for further details see Harrington & Brasche, 2011). The ETT program focus is to better prepare 20 final-year education students through an Internship placement at a school the DET deemed as having 'high Indigenous student populations'. The undertaking of two additional units in Indigenous education provides essential knowledge and further assists in broadening their understanding of what is required to successfully engage with Indigenous students in schools and their wider community during their Internship period. Concomitant to the importance of successfully engaging with Indigenous students and communities was the long-term retention of the teacher to that community.

The *Indigenous Cultural Competency (ICC) in Australian Universities* project also created a National Best Practice Framework for implementing Indigenous cultural competencies across the university sectors. The Framework is formed around five key Guiding Principles:

- Indigenous people should be actively involved in university governance and management;
- All graduates of Australian universities will have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities;
- University research will be conducted in a culturally competent way in partnership with Indigenous participants;
- Indigenous staffing will be increased at all appointment levels and, for academic staff, across a wider variety of academic fields; and,
- Universities will operate in partnership with their Indigenous communities and will help disseminate culturally competent practices to the wider community.

[\(http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/page/policy-advocacy/indigenous-issues/cultural-competency/\)](http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/page/policy-advocacy/indigenous-issues/cultural-competency/).

The DET's ETT project embodies a number of these guiding principles in its design. In brief, the ETT 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 Indigenous 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.

An evaluation of the ETT project's 2010 cohort reported that all intern teachers "developed a 'heart' for teaching Indigenous students and a 'heart' for Indigenous communities more generally .. and have settled into their first teaching placement confidently and with a sense of being culturally 'well prepared'" (Harrington & Brasche, 2011, p. 28). This current paper tracks the first ETT cohort of five UNE teacher graduates of 2008, and examines a) the quality of their personal and professional satisfaction of teaching in Indigenous communities, and b) their long-term retention as a teacher with their current school. This paper then makes links between how undertaking their Internship in schools with high Indigenous student populations through the ETT scholarship program, provided a meaningful experience that better prepared them both professionally and personally to teach and stay in these communities. In concluding, the article puts forward useful recommendations for both teacher education and students intending to teach in schools with high Indigenous student populations.

Methodology

This article reports on the first three years of teaching experiences for the first UNE ETT (2009) cohort of five final-year education students. The University of New England, Armidale, was invited by the (then) Department of Education & Training (DET) to participate in their NSW ETT program, in particular by encouraging third-year on-campus education students to apply for the competitive scholarship. As a rural university, UNE is strategically placed to successfully engage with this program: the School of Education enjoying a close relationship with the UNE Oorala Aboriginal Cultural Centre. UNE was able to extend its support to the successful recipients in the form of:

- accessing Indigenous mentors within the UNE's Oorala Aboriginal Cultural Centre throughout their final year of study;
- internship school visits (in addition to that of Professional Experience Staff), and individualised and/or group de-briefing and discussions (online wiki, personal phone calls, emails) by the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course coordinator; and,
- post-Internship evaluation of their experiences and exploration of the ramifications for a successful transition into professional teaching practice.

The ETT scholarship recipients were required to undertake a modified final year of study that included two units in Indigenous Education. The first unit was tailored to offer a unique balance of history, current educational trends, Indigenous 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 intention for the recipients to interrogate, identify and challenge, that is, to critically reflect upon, their own understandings and attitudes towards Indigenous people through reflective journal entries and readings. The second unit required recipients to design, implement and evaluate a Community Project involving their students and the wider community, within their Internship context. The Community Project needed to be grounded in local Indigenous history, used as an education tool, and continue once the recipient's Internship period had expired. The recipients needed to work collaboratively with the school's Indigenous Liaison Officer and an Indigenous elder in the wider community where appropriate. Upon graduation the five recipients were offered on-going teaching positions in schools that reported 'high Indigenous student populations'. This paper reports on the quality of their personal and professional teaching experiences to assess the longer-term effectiveness of the ETT Internship experience three years ago.

Through a short survey of five semi-structured informal questions, the participants were interviewed by telephone and asked to reflect upon their involvement with the ETT and how it assisted their personal and professional transition into professional teaching. The questions were broad in nature and designed to understand if the teachers were willing to remain in their original school placements; if the ETT opportunity made a positive difference for them in their current teaching role (and if so, how); and how they would rate their current personal and professional satisfaction working and living amongst an Indigenous community. For each question, students were asked to respond from both a personal and professional point of view. The survey data were analysed by the researcher using Friere's (1972) concept of generative themes seeking to recognise similarities and differences in responses, and identifying emerging trends and themes. It was evident that the recipients had benefited greatly from their involvement with the ETT opportunity, and this article proceeds to discuss in brief each of the themes that emerged from the survey.

The five female scholarship recipients were typically 21 years of age and had all originated from rural backgrounds within the NSW New England region. All of the students had indicated they were prepared to be placed anywhere in the State for their permanent teaching position. One student was placed in a rural school near the Queensland border with a 40% Indigenous student population, another on the mid-north coast with a 30% Indigenous student population, two in the Western Sydney district (30% and 10% Indigenous student populations), and another in a school located in the far west of NSW with a 70% Indigenous student population.

Results

The news of successfully gaining the scholarship in December of 2008 had a positive psychological impact upon all five students that became evident during their 2009 Internship. One teacher summed up the feeling of the group by saying:

Knowing I had the scholarship meant I had a permanent job. This meant I could relax more and stress less during my Internship because I knew at the end of it I had a guaranteed future. What a relief especially at a time when jobs are really hard to get! (Teacher 1)

All five students reported that they were happy with their geographical location, although one of the students posted to Western Sydney had prepared herself to be placed somewhere 'in the sticks' and was pleasantly surprised. She said,

I expected to be placed somewhere really isolated but was quite excited to be placed in the city. The city does have its advantages. Because I am so busy, I do like my 24-hour shopping that the city provides (Teacher 4).

One student admitted she had to look up Google maps to find where in the State she was being sent.

As soon as I was told where I was being sent, I thought, 'Where in the hell is that?', so I looked it up on Google maps, and I still couldn't see it, but then I found my bearings and I was really happy where I was going to be teaching" (Teacher 1).

There was a total of four themes that emerged from the data. One of the themes that emerged from the data was how motivated and satisfied all five students were about their professional learning experiences and opportunities extended to them in the first three years of teaching. Comments included:

I have been given every opportunity to take on leadership roles by my Principal. He has encouraged me to try, and I have been allowed to fail. As a result, I have implemented iPad and X-boxes into my school and have been

asked to set this up at neighbouring schools. I have also provided iPad PD training for teachers in other schools (Teacher 1)

I have had heaps of good leadership opportunities. I was the chosen teacher for the National Partnership that meant that I was part of the committee that helps set targets and goals for the school. In the first three years I had a ‘go’ at everything, but now I do what I am interested in (Teacher 5)

We got a new Principal in my second year – she is just fantastic! She encouraged me to lead whole-school staff meetings and PD to other staff (Teacher 3).

A number of teachers indicated how happy they were working with the other teachers in the school:

As soon as I walked in the school, I was instantly accepted! It was just wonderful. Everyone was so helpful and supportive (Teacher 1)

All the staff was very supportive when I arrived. I was really pleased to see that there were quite a few young teachers – that is always a bonus, and now we all get along socially and professionally. Sharing is the big thing at my school. All programming is collaborative, and everyone gets along and is happy working together (Teacher 3)

Teacher 4 had reported that her Principal had said to her on her first day, “If you can survive at this school, you can survive anywhere”, and unfortunately for her, the first year was a real struggle:

I was given a difficult year 6 class for my first year. I had limited support and it was just horrible. There were a few times I thought if it was all worth it. I finished the year and the Principal’s appraisal of my teaching ability was ‘Well, you either sink or swim at this school, and you didn’t sink so that’s good’. My second year I enjoyed a much nicer class, and I began to establish a network of friends at school and the community. My third year has been the best and I have really enjoyed. Finally feel like I know what I’m doing. (Teacher 4).

Another theme was that all five students indicated that if given a choice, they would happily stay at the school and the community. Two teachers will move to other schools to follow their partner’s employment, whilst the other three are busy planning to remain at the school.

I will stay here a while yet. I am being trained in Reading Recovery this year. I

like the school. It is a small school with 200 students so it is easier to fit in and get to know all the students (Teacher 2)

I liked the school so much I brought a house and decided I’ll stay for a while (Teacher 3)

There are so many leadership and training opportunities that are coming up. I will stay for a few years to get that experience, but also because I don’t think I have learned enough yet (Teacher 4).

The third theme was focused on the Internship itself. One of the scholarship requirements was that the students needed to complete their Internship at a school the NSW DET department identified as having ‘high Indigenous student populations’. At the beginning of the scholarship, the students discussed how this ‘unknown’ presented as an intimidating factor for them that made them consider how they would manage this situation. Despite the initial trepidation, all five teachers identified their ETT Internship placement experience as the most significant and valuable to their current quality of teaching and professional satisfaction.

The best thing about the scholarship was that I was given an Internship that was more challenging and at a place I would not have taken otherwise. The challenges I faced there such as the low

socio-economic status and health problems, are the same in my current school. Having to design and implement the Community Project on Internship gave me good grounding to run programs and improved my organizational skills no end. Now everyone at school has me coordinate and run most of the programs at school (Teacher 4).

The kids on my Internship were a bit wild so I had to learn a great deal very quickly! That helped me a lot when I was thrown in the deep end in my first year, but as I had seen a lot of the same behaviour on Internship, that meant I didn't stress so much (Teacher 2).

My Internship definitely! I was given a tough school and that gave me confidence and made me realize I can be a teacher. When I was told I got one of the scholarships, that was a turning point for me. I felt that because the ETT interview panel believed in me, I could believe in me. This gave me confidence big-time! (Teacher 1).

Another theme that emerged was how the ETT opportunity personally enhanced their cultural awareness of Indigenous issues on a variety of levels. They 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 in their communities. The scholarship provided relevant and crucial information they still used and appreciated in their current classrooms, specifically their clear understanding about the Education Department's Indigenous 2009-2012 goals, perspectives and strategies. The teachers shared how they appreciated the pedagogical information on how to embed aboriginal perspectives into each of their lessons, and the importance of harnessing the community to build upon their awareness of specific local language and cultural traditions. One student was proud to share how much she had enjoyed being taught local traditions by her students. She said,

The kids are just awesome! They have taught me some amazing things like how to catch echidnas, and how to turtle dive – things I would *never* think I would know! For example, they told me that around here, when wattle comes out, the turtles are ready! (Teacher 1).

It was evident for the participants in the ETT scholarship that the Internship was highly instructive by providing a 'hands-on', reality-check of the teaching profession in schools with high Indigenous student populations. This experience provided the opportunity for theory to be put into practice, and for the intern teachers to identify and appreciate their personal and professional strengths and areas of weakness. The ETT cohort of 2009 was able to report a range of positive and professional growth from their involvement with the ETT scholarship.

Discussion

The analysis of the 2008 cohort of the UNE ETT participants clearly shows how they gained valuable insights, lessons and outcomes gained 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 main aim of the ETT program is to improve the overall understanding, knowledge and retention of new teachers to NSW DET schools with 'high Indigenous student populations'. Crucial to the program is the investment of additional professional knowledge, experience

and skills relevant to Indigenous education necessary to deliver a positive teaching experience for all concerned. This ‘investment’ reinforces the important relationship and conclusions Hattie (2003) reported between the professional/intra-personal qualities of the teacher, and an improved quality education experience.

The design of the ETT program provides a comprehensive approach to Indigenous education through the unique balance of theoretical preparation with a targeted practical engagement in schools with high Indigenous student populations. The participants reported the value of the two additional Indigenous Education units had to their current teaching practice. The units were designed to confront and force students to critique their personal biases, prejudices and preconceptions surrounding Indigenous peoples, and how this may impair their professional role as a teacher. In doing so, the program addressed recognised issues associated with young and inexperienced teachers staffing rural and remote schools as reported by the Cape York Institute (2007) and Heslop, (2003).

Another theme that emerged from the teachers’ first three years of teaching was the amount of professional growth they reported. All demonstrated to their teaching colleagues a willingness to be a collegial and to take on additional active additional staffing responsibilities enthusiastically. As one teacher reflected upon her first three years of professional teaching “I probably said yes to far too many things – now I’m learning the art of saying No!” (Teacher 4). All teachers expressed their appreciation at the number of leadership opportunities they had been a part of, and how valuable these experiences had been in expanding their confidence and ‘place’ in the school. This proved to be a way in which they could embed their professionalism in the school and broader community.

The interviews with the five teachers were enlightening and informative when revisiting one of the main objectives of the ETT scholarship program, that of retaining new teachers long-term in schools and communities with high Indigenous student populations. In this sense, the ETT program provides evidence that revisits the program’s inception based on the 2003/2004 NSW DET, the AECG, and FaHCSIA (2009) recommendations. All five teachers indicated their willingness and enthusiasm to remain at their current school, with only two citing with a sense of regret, a move motivated by personal reasons. The program had delivered five new scheme teachers with the professional and personal qualities necessary to effectively deal with contexts of a challenging nature, including geographical isolation, student diversity, community demographics e.g. ethnicity, socio-economic status, mean age, the town’s economic and employment prospects, and limited access to resources (Halsey, 2005; Hayes et al., 2006; Roberts, 2003; Vinson, 2002). The ripple-effect of the retention of these teachers to such schools is far reaching with a positive impact upon the students, staff, and broader community as a whole.

Building upon the reported success of the ETT program, there are two recommendations that would further enhance the program. One concerns the continuity of the overall teacher/student experience. The NSW Education Department 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. Secondly, it was evident that all the participants rated the quality of their Internship at a school with high Indigenous student populations as the “best thing”, “amazing”, and “what made the difference to my professional development as a teacher”. A future recommendation for tertiary education providers would be to extend the quality of this learning opportunity, and consider placing students on practicum during their teacher education at least once at a school with high Indigenous student populations.

Conclusion

The first teachers from the ETT scholarship are living proof that tailoring the learning and training experiences to meet the needs of Indigenous students does make a significant difference. All teachers shared a strong sense of optimism and enthusiasm for their future teaching in schools with high Indigenous student populations. The successful UNE recipients of the ETT scholarship have become excellent ambassadors for the joint DET/UNE 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. Potentially 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'. It is 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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