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Abstract: This paper considers the sense of epistemic isolation that "white" teachers do and can experience and acknowledges the value of Indigenous life and Indigenous epistemologies. The paper identifies how it is important that teacher education programs in remote and Indigenous settings create opportunities for preservice teachers to undertake authentic practicum experiences. The discussion also illustrates the impact that preservice teacher education programs can have on teacher employment and retention in Indigenous settings. The paper finally asserts the quality of the experience for both preservice teachers and Indigenous participants.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Preservice Teacher Practicum, Authentic Learning, Praxis Inquiry, Teacher Retention, Remote Learning

Introduction

IN 1996 LAWRY Mahon, a lecturer at Victoria University in Melbourne Australia, visited a school in the Northern Territory (NT). During this visit Lawry was concerned to see that story books available to Indigenous young people in the school's library were the same as the stories offered to city children in mainstream schools. Lawry also noticed that the school had limited stories that documented and made public Indigenous everyday life and Indigenous ways of knowing. Such an awakening led Lawry to create the Story Writing in Remote Locations (SWIRL) program. The SWIRL program is a holiday program that is held once a year for four weeks and is attended by primary and secondary school students in remote and rural Indigenous locations. During this program Indigenous young people are involved in a range of activities which are later assembled into a story book. A range of multi-literacies are embedded in the program where participants are encouraged to use photos, video clippings, paintings and artwork to tell their stories. These stories are then laminated and bound copies are given to the Indigenous writers to share with families and their school community.

SWIRL is in its fifteen year of operation and attracts a range of stakeholders each year. Stakeholders include local Indigenous young people from where the program is held, SWIRL facilitators and volunteers, including preservice teachers, academic staff members, youth workers and youth work students. In past years the SWIRL program has also attracted a range of international students and academics from a variety of disciplines. IBM has also been an important stakeholder in the SWIRL project, sponsoring it since its inception. Over the past 14 years IBM has donated over 100 personal computers, as well as printers, ink cartridges and Think Pads (IBM 2006).

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In 2005, The SWIRL evaluation project was funded by the Department of Education, Training and Workplace Relations. Many themes emerged from the evaluation process. Overall report findings highlighted the positive impact that the SWIRL program has on the lives of Indigenous communities, preservice teachers, education lecturers and community stakeholders. For young Indigenous people, SWIRL provides opportunities to document personal accounts of what is valued in their everyday lives. Through their creation of digital books, young people are not only introduced to new media and its possibilities, but are also able to celebrate and reaffirm notions of cultural identity. SWIRL also presents young Indigenous people with a set of tools that enable them to record and disseminate personal stories which underpin their "life-worlds" (Shutz and Luckmann 1973).

By encouraging young people in SWIRL communities to record aspects of their lives, the project has also helped them to improve local literacy levels (Mahon *et al* 2007). This is because the stories include young people's legacies, and this is shown to be a powerful tool to engage them to enhance their literacy skills. Over the years, SWIRL has ensured that Indigenous narratives are documented, celebrated and shared in a public way. This has resulted in the creation of hundreds of Indigenous children's story books that have subsequently been used in classrooms in local schools. Resource rich schools that have the latest ICT gadgets, fancy play ground equipment and state of the art turf, are culturally poor in the absence of well prepared teachers to cultivate inclusive learning environments.

The paper that follows chooses to focus on one theme tied to how the ongoing issue of teacher retention in the Northern Territory can be addressed. It is a known fact that teachers working in remote Indigenous communities stay little more than eight months on average (Mahon, Cacciattolo, Zimmerman, Martino & Davidson 2007). Social isolation, cultural separation, alongside the tyranny of distance are just a few reasons many teachers become disillusioned and decide to leave. Mahon *et al* (2007) draw attention to this issue and make note of the importance of teacher education programs that give preservice teachers opportunities to experience working with Indigenous communities in authentic ways. Dispelling romantic stereotypical views of teaching in the outback is the first step to ensuring that teachers are adequately informed of what is expected of them prior to signing a contract with remote school regions and education departments. Creating pathways for preservice teachers that leads to informed decision making upon graduation can only occur in the presence of university programs that locate practicum programs in remote and rural Indigenous settings.

Literature Review

While there is abundance of government policy interventions, that attempt to address literacy and numeracy challenges faced by Indigenous communities, Indigenous children are still at the bottom end of academic league tables (Vinson 2007). The National Inquiry and PISA (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment) findings reinforce the need for academics, school communities, service providers and government officials to work together to achieve positive schooling experiences for all students in remote and rural parts of Australia. Developing better practices and positive pedagogical frameworks around teaching and learning, and assessment and reporting, are crucial elements for the addressing of issues tied to skills deficiencies, disengagement, cultural and social connectedness and school readiness within Indigenous communities (Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe & Gunstone 2000).

One factor aligned with Indigenous young people not having adequate literacy and numeracy skills is linked to poorly-equipped practitioners who take on teaching positions in remote and rural communities (Kral 2007). Research conducted by Mooney, Halse & Craven (2003) attest to this highlighting that most preservice teachers have limited skills to teach Indigenous children because of an absence of relevant content and a lack of cultural knowledge in their teaching course. Further, their data findings show that "teachers who had undertaken Aboriginal Studies preservice training had a higher self-concept and capacity to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students than their untrained equivalent" (2003: 5). A strong recommendation arising from the report was a need for preservice teacher courses to include practicum placements in remote and Indigenous communities as this would "better prepare them to teach aboriginal children" (2003: 5).

Documentary evidence on teacher retention within remote Indigenous communities is also scarce. Despite this there are some studies which highlight reasons for poor teacher retention in rural and remote parts of Australia. Research conducted by SiMERR provides some insight into reasons why teachers working in remote Indigenous communities, leave so quickly. Often is the case that newly arrived graduates are poorly equipped to deal with the various challenges that come their way and as a result stay on average seven months or less (Collins Review 1999). Further, professional isolation, cultural difference and poorly developed teaching skills impact greatly on whether a settlement experience for newly arrived teachers is positive (Lyons, Cooksery, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg 2006; Roberts 2005). A lack of professional development opportunities as well as being forced to teach in untrained subjects can also lead to dissatisfaction for teachers in remote communities (Sharplin 2002; Mahon *et al* 2007). Value clashes as well as low community involvement are also reasons for teachers in remote schools to feel disconnected and alienated with schools, students and community members (Gibson 1994).

The role of preservice teacher programs in actively preparing preservice teachers to teach Indigenous studies is well documented in the literature. So too is the need for preservice teacher programs to provide opportunities for practicum in remote and rural Indigenous communities. Such opportunities are said to impact upon the likelihood of teaching success of graduates who take up contracts to teach in Indigenous communities (Mahon *et al* 2007). Partington (1997) describes the experiences of a group of preservice teachers who had a practicum experience in remote Indigenous communities. Partington relates how the majority of the preservice teachers were frustrated when teaching in remote classrooms as they had failed to consider the cultural context they were in. Through adopting the mainstream curriculum, as well as mainstream teaching methods, students were largely uninterested and disengaged. Yet, there were some success stories reported by Partington for those presevice teachers who understood the importance of bringing the lived experience into the classroom. A couple of the preservice teachers achieved success in their new circumstances through creating culturally relevant activities that were meaningful to students involved. The teachers who were successful not only adapted their lessons but also made good use of the Aboriginal Education Workers in the classrooms, emphasising how necessary inter-cultural collaboration is in realising positive outcomes in cross-cultural contexts. The critical relevance of the research outlines that obstructions to valuable learning experiences can be tempered through inter-cultural collaboration, establishing genuine reciprocal relationships between communities and education providers, as well as having knowledgeable indigenous adults available to mediate and facilitate inter-cultural communication.

Mahon *et al* (2007: 171) assert the dangers and pitfalls for graduate teachers who, having had no experience teaching in remote Indigenous communities, entertain unrealistic perceptions of what teaching in 'the outback' looks and feels like. The tyranny of isolation from family and friends, as well as limited professional expertise in working with Indigenous learners and their life worlds, can lead to beginning teachers feeling ill-prepared to adequately teach (Letts, Novak, Gottshcall, Green & Meyenn. 2005). Indeed, teachers in remote communities who are supported by their peers and by professional teaching associations are more likely to stay after a period of 8 months (Herrington & Herrington 2001).

The role of preservice teacher education programs in actively preparing graduates to teach Indigenous studies is an important aspect of teacher retention in remote and rural communities and is well-documented in the literature. Mahon *et al* (2007: 173), for example, outline how the SWIRL program provides preservice teachers with an authentic opportunity "to experience teaching and to be informed about the kinds of skills they will need to be successful in a remote setting". SWIRL participants who have experienced the isolation that comes with teaching in remote locations and who in the process have found satisfaction in this work – all the while displaying resilience and conflict resolution skills – are more likely to return to remote teaching once they graduate. As noted in an IBM (2006: 4) report:

> *An unexpected outcome of the SWIRL program has been the number of SWIRL student teachers returning to Central Australia to teach full time. They remain there for about three times as long as non-SWIRL teaching recruits, who stay for an average of seven months. So far over thirty ex-SWIRL participants have returned for two to three years and some for longer with two becoming principals in a remote school. This trend is a great benefit to the region's isolated communities who often struggle to attract and retain teaching staff.*

By participating in SWIRL, future teachers are able to assess the likelihood of their teaching success should they decide to take up a contract to teach in an Indigenous community. In circumstances such as these, where decisions of employment are based on 'lived experiences', there is less likelihood of being swayed by false presumptions and romantic notions of 'living off the land'. Having a more realistic view of what to expect when living and teaching in rural and remote settings is the first step to ensuring that the most suitable applicants are chosen to do this work.

Zimmermann, Davidson, Cacciattolo & Mahon. (2007) highlight how the SWIRL program provides young Indigenous learners with literacy modes of inquiry that are strongly related to the lives of children. Preservice teachers in the SWIRL program utilise home items, magazines, photos and arts and crafts as a basis for creating story books with young Indigenous participants. Through the incorporation of teaching materials that take into account the social, spiritual, cultural and economic backgrounds of the lives of the students, young people involved in the program are more likely to see connections between writing and their own personal stories. As such, SWIRL provides young people with opportunities to document and celebrate their individual ways of knowing that are not defined by Western notions of what teaching and learning in Indigenous contexts ought to look like. Preservice teachers are also encouraged to position learners at the centre of their own literacy development; young Indigenous participants in the program are encouraged to write stories of moments in their lives that have significance and meaning to them.

Healy's (2008) work around multiliteracies draws attention to the ways in which multimodal genres in literacy education can enrich pedagogical skills, content knowledge and, most importantly, student learning. Healy makes clear the need to transcend dominant modes of literacy which typically include print media. In an age of iPODs, My Space, Wikis and iPhones, information communication technologies (ICT) are part and parcel of the everyday life of "digital natives" (Prensky 2001). The SWIRL program utilises a range of digital resources to teach reading and writing over a four-week holiday period. Indigenous students work with preservice teachers and other SWIRL volunteers to document their cultural histories in creative and interactive ways. Photo stories, 'claymation' and the construction of audio-story books, for example, assist Indigenous learners to canvass their personal narratives in creative and multi-literate ways. It is not uncommon to see SWIRL Indigenous participants with miniature storybooks attached to key rings. These storybooks, which have been written with the assistance of a SWIRL volunteer, are proudly displayed to friends and families. Providing preservice teachers with a range of tools that engage Indigenous learners helps them to build up practical teaching and learning tool kits that can be utilised upon graduation.

Methodology

The project utilised qualitative methodology to collect data. Preservice teachers involved in the SWIRL program undertook both focus group sessions and interviews. Interviews and focus group sessions provided the researchers with opportunities to delve into subjective viewpoints related to preservice teacher involvement in the SWIRL program. The richness that comes with qualitative feedback may not have otherwise been granted to the researchers if they had relied on surveys or questionnaires to document preservice teachers' perceptions.

Central to this work has been the development of professional relationships between all participants. Relational pedagogy underpins the philosophy and practice for SWIRL. This is the capacity to build trust in relationships across time and these great distances. The centrality of relationship in this research is fore grounded as the methodological deliberations are discussed. Through a Collaborative Practitioner Research (CPR) methodology (Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger & O'Rourke. 2001), participants are active in all stages of the research: from planning through data collection and data analysis, to the generation of findings. The methodology uses participatory action research approaches, as participation in the research is designed to reflexively inform participants and aid the development of their work. For the research methodology to be responsive to the oral tradition implicit in Indigenous culture, dialogue between the communities/participants and the researchers is viewed as a valid and necessary means of data collection. Action research and community-engaged research is a regular practice in educational research. CPR is based on accepted processes of action research (see, for example, Reason & Bradbury's 2008 Sage *Handbook of Action Research*).

Other data collected involved the gathering of commentaries from past SWIRL attendees, current SWIRL participants and Indigenous community members. Data collection also involved interviews with local council workers, youth workers and government officials. The rich data sets mainly consist of conversations with community members and adult participants of SWIRL. These conversations with participants who have experienced the SWIRL program form the basis for the collaborative findings that are presented. However for the purpose of this paper, data collected from preservice teachers alongside government official comment-

aries of preserivce teacher involvement in the SWIRL program is used and woven throughout the next section.

Data obtained was coded using a thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden 2008) as this coding process was seen to be the most useful in allowing participant voices to emerge and be heard. Literature, both international and national was also sourced enabling the researchers to gain greater insight into Indigenous ways of knowing. The literature also highlighted the importance of having holiday programs like SWIRL to adequately prepare preservice teachers should they decide to teach in a remote Indigenous community upon graduation. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Data Findings

Swirl Graduates - Teaching in the Northern Territory

The literature chapter highlighted the ever increasing challenges that face graduate teachers who decide to take up teaching contracts in remote and rural Indigenous communities. Isolation, an absence of professional knowledge and skill tied to working with Indigenous cultures alongside poorly resourced schools were amongst some of the reasons for high teacher turn over rates in remote Indigenous communities. Researchers and academics noted that one way to address low teacher retention rates was to ensure that teacher education programs created opportunities for preservice teachers to undertake practicum experience in remote indigenous settings (Mooney et al 2003). It was argued that providing opportunities for preservice teachers to undertake practicum placements in remote Indigenous communities would give them greater insight into the levels of complexity tied to working in this field. With the average stay of teachers in remote communities being seven months or less (Collins 1999) it seems that a nation-wide approach to tackling this issue is very much needed.

Working with Indigenous communities in collaborative and proactive ways should not be based solely on preparing preservice teachers to adequately do this work in their practicum experience. There are of course tertiary students training to become nurses, youth workers, lawyers and community development officers who would all benefit from a placement in an Aboriginal setting. This would also give preservice students an opportunity to assess their personal suitability to working in Aboriginal communities on a permanent basis. Dispelling romantic notions of what it means to teach in the 'Outback' or what it means to work with 'Indigenous communities' is central to ensuring that the right professionals end up working in settings that will lead to successful outcomes for all stakeholders. Stacey who was on the SWIRL program five year ago had this to say;

> *One of the greatest challenges of people coming to teach in remote settings is that people don't have any context and so they go, oh yeah, that sounds really interesting. I'm feeling a little bored, you know I could do with a challenge, but they don't actually recognise just how much of a challenge it is. Because I think a lot of mainstream Australia thinks about indigenous, remote indigenous communities in quite a romantic way and romanticise the whole experience of what it would be to work in an indigenous community and they don't really understand that the cultural divide is so vast and not just between white and black but between other indigenous groups as well.*

SWIRL provides all participants with an authentic practicum experience for a four week period of time.

In linking the points raised above to the SWIRL program, the data collected showed clear connections between preservice teacher involvement in SWIRL and teacher employment and retention in remote rural Indigenous communities. Similarly SWIRL participants expressed a greater awareness of Indigenous culture which in turn gave them a heightened sense of Indigenous 'ways of knowing'. This is evident in a teacher graduate's reflections of his time in the SWIRL program;

> *My girlfriend and I well we were thinking about going to Africa to teach for a couple of years and then the opportunity to go on the SWIRL program came up so I took it. And then when I went on SWIRL it was like, well my girlfriend and I don't have to go to Africa now, because we have the same third world issues right here in our own country now. And the Aboriginal culture…I would never have experienced this had I not have been involved in the SWIRL program. And when the opportunity came up to teach there at the end of my degree it was sort of like "Yes, why wouldn't I" Not because I need to or want to save people, but because I thought it's where I can do my job the best (SWIRL Graduate)*

The extract above clearly draws our attention to the power of practicum placements in remote Indigenous communities to transform lives. In this example we see evidence of a beginning teacher who attributes his experiences in the SWIRL program as being fundamental to gaining employment in an Indigenous community. It is important to also highlight the use of language here. In one instance the interviewee specifically refers to his future work in a remote community as not being the result of a desire 'to save people', but rather because of his skills set on offer. The dangers of any professional working in Indigenous communities with a 'Save the World' mentality can never be over-estimated. Too often professionals feel it their duty and responsibility to 'make things right' and to speak for and on behalf of Indigenous people (Watson 2002).

The SWIRL program is very clear in its philosophy that all participants work in collaboration with Indigenous communities in a respectful and non-threatening way. Pre-training Program sessions delivered by the co-ordinator of the Program as well as the NT Department of Education and Training (DET) also provide SWIRL participants with an opportunity in which to develop understandings around cultural and social protocols with working with Indigenous communities. One SWIRL graduate commented on how her involvement in the program gave her a greater level of preparedness for developing her professional skills. She asserts;

> *SWIRL provides you with a foundation in terms of what is going on. It also helps in getting a knowledge base that will give you a greater chance of succeeding if you decide to go on to work in remote communities as a graduate rather than doing the cold turkey thing and not knowing*

As well as providing SWIRL preservice teachers with an opportunity in which to develop their cultural knowledge, the words above tell us that professional knowledge is also enhanced. SWIRL participants engage in a range of innovative activities that invite learners to creatively

showcase their everyday lives through multiliteracies and other digital modalities. Importantly, participants work in teams to prepare for the SWIRL program and identify effective teaching and practices that will best engage the cohort of students they are working with. Through this work there is a more in-depth knowledge of the importance of working with colleagues in a professional way. Further the benefits of developing literacy activities that transcend traditional print based notions of how literacy should be taught are more likely to lead to more meaningful learning outcomes. For example SWIRL activities have involved and continue to involve electronic story board. Indigenous children, through using PowerPoint and 'Photostory', are able to construct a story about a particular event in their day –to-day lives. The narrator's voice is recorded and hyperlinked to various slides thereby adding another dimension to notions of literacy. Activities like these benefit not only Indigenous young people involved, but also the SWIRL non-Indigenous participants. SWIRL facilitators, through this work, are able to develop their professional skills and knowledge base around those characteristics of teaching and learning that contribute to the creation of effective literacy engagement.

Another positive aspect of the SWIRL program is the strong collegial ties that are formed by non-Indigenous participants during the 4 week block placement. There were a number of reported cases where more than one SWIRL graduate was employed to teach in an Indigenous school;

> *My two friends taught in a remote Indigenous community up North. They told me that the situation they were in was very rough, that if they did not have each other there then they would not have lasted a week. There was a lot of violence in the community, there was no support from the principal and it might sound trivial but they did not even have vehicle access, which I think is a big part of it, especially when you're so far out of anywhere to not be able to get away. And yes they had nothing from home so it was like you take your suitcase, you're in the middle of no-where, a place you've never been, people you have never met and to not have any support network other than one other person, and that was what made all the difference.*

Having a friend to share personal and professional thoughts with while working in Indigenous communities is essential to fostering wellbeing. Isolation, the tyranny of distance and separation from friends and loved ones is a major reason for poor teacher retention in remote Indigenous communities (Sharplin 2002). One positive aspect of participating in the SWIRL program was that preservice teachers had an opportunity to familiarise themselves with an Indigenous setting. Through being able to foster friendships with local community members and young people, connection and collective ties were able to be established. For one SWIRL graduate who secured a teaching job at the community she was in as a SWIRL participant, social bonds and friendships with local members had already been formed prior to her commencing her teaching position. Therefore there were no illusionary notions tied to the Indigenous community she would work in. Rather, the SWIRL program provided Lisa with a realistic vision of what her professional and social life would be like once she accepted her teaching contract. Realistic visions and having a social connection to Indigenous communities prior to working in their midst` assists in fuelling feelings of belonging and identity. The stronger a graduate feels that his/her connection with local communities is present and evolving the greater the likelihood of retention and overall satisfaction with the work.

One of the first ever participants in the SWIRL program, awarded the Victorian Secondary School teacher of the year in 2007, spoke openly of the impact of SWIRL on her desire to teach in remote Indigenous settings. Following on from her time in the program Tracey returned to teach in a remote community as a first year graduate. She spent a total of 2 years there. She spoke of the impact that this experience had on her teaching and learning skills. For Tracey, teaching and working with Indigenous learners and their families allowed her to understand the importance of establishing strong relationships with young people. Additionally developing meaningful connections was important for inspiring students to want to learn and to want to come to school in the first instance. Tracey now teaches at a mainstream school in the outskirts of Melbourne. She acknowledges her enthusiasm and passion to embed Indigenous culture and knowledge in her classroom as being the result of all of her time spent in the Northern Territory. What is also inspiring to note is that Tracey has set up a Year 10 elective called 'Black Tracks' which examines historical and contemporary culture with a focus on Aboriginal Australia. The program has been running for 3 years and involves a partnership with an Indigenous school in the Northern Territory as well as a number of activities that highlight Indigenous life and culture.

> *We've spent a considerable amount of time up at the Koori Heritage trust*; *they've been great supporting us*, *they've allowed the girls to do learning tasks there*: *we've done the walking Birrarung*, *walking along to Yarra river*, *which was an amazing experience*. *Just opening up to that experience and then being able to share that with students*, *and friends and family too*, *that sort of stuff*, *as you're walking through the city of Melbourne*, *and you've got this guy who can take you back to a place where you can have this connection with the land*, *and I suppose that's one of the most important things about Aboriginal culture*; *and to show the kids here*, *from Geelong*, *the outback*, *kids who may never have been there*, *but for them to be able to see that in urban Australia*, *that connection to land*, *that connection to culture*, *all that*, *is still so strong*. *I think*.

In this instance we see how one practitioner has managed to keep alive her passion for Indigenous culture through her teaching and learning practices. The SWIRL program can therefore be seen as a driver for innovative curriculum projects tied Indigenous themes. SWIRL graduates who find themselves teaching in mainstream schooling are able to offer authentic experiences and knowledge of Indigenous life and Indigenous ways of knowing. Such insight offers far richer classroom discussions then reading about Indigenous history out of text books. Real life experiences of Indigenous culture give teachers a chance to speak from a place of personal experience. Personal experiences are more likely to fuel a zest for wanting students to learn about Indigenous themes as seen in Tracey's case. Establishing partnerships, designing curriculum that has an experiential Indigenous focus and celebrating Indigenous culture through exchange programs, are indeed attributes of effective teaching and learning practices. Evoking deep and meaningful connections with Indigenous communities and their history is less likely to occur when this knowledge arises solely from text books. The SWIRL program can therefore be seen to influence curriculum in mainstream schooling and in the process provides young learners with greater opportunities to learn in authentic ways (Freire 1993).

Preservice Teacher Return to Melbourne

This focus group closed their session with issues addressed around the return to the 'ordinary' world of their homes in Melbourne. A respondent begins by acknowledging that when the SWIRL group "…got back we were grumpy and moody. You want to share your experience with people but they don't understand". Another respondent qualified his sense of learning when he stated he got "sick of talking to people and you give the standard answer 'it was awesome'. You have to keep it to yourself. You come back with this awesome experience but to find an outlet to share it with is difficult. Some people in Melbourne "…do not appreciate the experience".

The families of the SWIRL participants are important in bringing the practice to a satisfying end but this did not always happen. Another respondent in this focus group noted, "…when I got home that night I showed my family some photos and there were little giggles and smirks at the children. I said if you want to leave the room leave. I had to leave the room because these people were my family for a month. I do not know if I would have felt this strongly previously had I not have been on SWIRL". The quest to understand the racism and prejudice is illustrated in the above commentary. Another SWIRL participant commented that "…one thing I found hard to explain is when people talk about aborigines and say: 'they are all on the dole they should just get a job'". These same SWIRL participants called for Victoria University to make things different in their university education. They stated that the remote Indigenous community experience should be compulsory, that Indigenous Studies should be compulsory and that, "After the SWIRL experience you come back a better person and the passion you acquire is deep". This same SWIRL participant stated, "I went up there wanting to be a good person and open-minded but you come back being inspired. You see all these terrible things happening up there and you realise as a teacher and youth worker you have a chance to inspire…".

Government Officials have their Say

One senior DET (NT Department of Education and Training) official who was interviewed also spoke of the benefits of the SWIRL program to enhancing employment prospects in the region. At the time of the interview Jack noted that there were 50 vacancies in the school system that needed filling and that is was important that new graduates who were appointed into positions were well supported by teachers and support structures. As Jack puts it,

> *If we don't have all the support structures, advisory staff to back up those new teachers in need when they hit the ground on day one then we are still going through the motions as far as education service delivery goes.*

Jack also mentioned that individuals, who have had an opportunity to work and live in the NT for a short period of time, were more likely to 'stick it out than most people who had been urban-centric most of their lives'. Additionally time spent working with Indigenous communities in remote settings is more likely to give potential employees a more realistic insight into what life in remote settings is all about. Jack asserts that, 'people do have a romantic sort of view of what's out in these places and what can or can't be achieved. But that tends to be the sort of lay of the land'. Jack highlighted the fact that programs like SWIRL help to dispel such romantic views and are therefore a necessary part of teacher training

programs. Further, he proposed alternative models to the SWIRL program that could address issue of teaching vacancies in NT schools. Jack spoke of the possibility of having an 'Internship' in NT schools to address this issue. The internship model could potentially link SWIRL preservice teachers to extending the 4 week block placement to more time in NT schools. Greater exposure to work in NT schools and Indigenous communities would enhance the chances of graduates staying on for greater lengths of time. This would then lead to greater stability in schools where Indigenous learners would not have to deal with having numerous teachers in any one school year.

As well as having a model of 'Internship' in the NT for preservice students, Jack also spoke of the possibility of having an 'Internship' for Indigenous community members wanting to do some academic training in Melbourne,

> *We've got a whole range of teachers and assistant teachers and support staff that could be provided with some upgrading of qualifications and training. It would good to broker not only the opportunity for students from our neck of the woods to come up and do training up here and I guess it's the internship. I mean we'd value having some of our staff go down and get to the other side of the culture down south. I mean we are providing it one way but I think Joanne actually go a huge world view now that she never had*'.

Another model is offered here by John. In this instance he discusses the possibility of having a range of teachers from the NT come to Melbourne to engage in professional development activities. Joanne, mentioned in the extract above, is an Indigenous elder and a teacher of twenty years who currently lives in a remote community setting. Joanne successfully undertook post-graduate studies in 2008 with the assistance of the School of Education at Victoria University. The major for Joanne wanting to participate in this work was so she could enhance her professional knowledge and expertise within teaching and learning paradigms. Developing her technological skills was also another motive. During her studies Joanne lived in Melbourne for 6 months and was involved in a number of intercultural activities. For example Joanne provided her colleagues in her class with valuable insight into Indigenous cultural practices, Indigenous epistemologies and the role of Visual imagery in storytelling. Joanne, an artist herself also had a successful and well attended exhibition in Melbourne. Other significant outcomes were that Joanne frequently co-taught with lecturers in units of study in the Bachelor of Education. Her commitment and passion to Indigenous ways of knowing was shared and discussed with preservice teachers who themselves were able to develop greater insight into Indigenous culture. This model of providing Indigenous teachers with an opportunity to develop further skills is an area in need of examining. Tapping into the range of resources that might go into professional development activities is indeed an important area in need of consideration. So too is ensuring that education providers and government officials are aware of best practice models that lead to successful outcomes for those intending to undertake further study.

Overall feedback tied to the SWIRL program was positive in the vices represented above. Teacher retention, teacher employment, fostering cultural and social awareness of Indigenous life was noted as being crucial outcomes of the program. So too was the possibility of establishing 'Internships' for preservice teachers who are thinking of teaching in the NT upon completion of their studies. The internship would allow for a more realistic experience of

Indigenous life that would not be clouded by romantic notions of working and living in the outback. Finally interviewees like John provide us with an opportunity to think about models of practice tied to Professional development for Indigenous teachers in remote settings. As seen in the case with Joanne, such a model has been very successful in many ways. Overall the relationships nurtured through the SWIRL program is a powerful vehicle for promoting enhanced literacy outcomes, intercultural collaboration and a greater awareness of the needs of Indigenous learners in remote community settings.

Conclusion

This article illustrates the engaged and positive teaching experience provided by SWIRL. The SWIRL facilitators and volunteers, preservice teachers, academic staff members, youth workers and youth work all attest to the value of SWIRL.

The VU preservice teachers utilised familiar items such as magazines, photos, art and crafts as the basis for creating storybooks with young Indigenous participants. Indigenous students work with preservice teachers and other SWIRL volunteers to document the Indigenous cultural histories in creative and interactive ways.

The data collected in the period of the research and additional anecdotal findings illustrate that the SWIRL program has and continues to have positive impacts on the lives of Indigenous communities, preservice teachers, education lecturers and community stakeholders. The work of Lawry Mahon emphasises the nature of authentic learning that is SWIRL. The SWIRL program illustrated in this paper shows how it is a model of practice for real life preparation the VU preservice teachers. It is a valued opportunity for all stakeholders as it is an occasion for exposure to the remote and rural Indigenous communities in a real way. The university community holds fast to the belief that it is its role in the preservice teacher education programs to consciously and actively prepares the graduating teachers to work with educational practices, which are informed by exposure to Australian Indigenous community and informed by traditional teaching and Indigenous studies. The VU experience illustrates a real life value as preservice teacher student teachers do return to Central Australia to teach full time after SWIRL.

The collaborative practitioner model of praxis is noted. Our preservice teachers undertook both focus group sessions and interviews and were consistently inquiring of their learning and the learning of the Indigenous young people.

This program redresses the sense of epistemic isolation that ‘white’ teachers do and can experience. The paper illustrates how there is a serious absence of professional knowledge and skill tied to working with Indigenous cultures and how SWIRL deepens the capacity of the teacher to work effectively and empathically alongside what is documented as poorly resourced schools. The VU SWIRL program is more than an occasion to ensure that this teacher education program creates opportunities for preservice teachers to undertake practicum experience in remote indigenous settings. SWIRL is a real encounter with the quality of life experienced in Indigenous community. The capacity for SWIRL to develop social connection and to fuel feelings of belonging in both the teachers and Indigenous participants is at the heart of this work. SWIRL is an authentic experiences and acknowledges the value of Indigenous life and Indigenous epistemologies.

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Lawry Mahon in a lecturer in the School of Education. His partnership with IBM led to the generation of the SWIRL program. This literacy enhancement program in the Northern Territory has been in practice for 15 years. Lawry Mahon developed the protocol to generate literacy products and short books whereby preservice teachers engage with young people in remote Australia to document their personal narratives. Mahon has established teaching opportunities in the Northern Territory and collaborates with the NT Department of Education whilst employed by Victoria University.