

Pre Service teachers make sense of teacher engagement and teacher identity through a looking- glass world

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Pre service teachers are required to engage in Supervised Professional Experiences (SPEs) during their Education Programs. The opportunity to participate as a member of school communities, interact with students and demonstrate knowledge gained during their coursework is generally met with enthusiasm. However, research suggests that pre service teachers completing SPEs in rural and remote communities experience anxiety in managing the cultural context of their placement. Of particular concern is the mismatch and confusion between what has been learned in their course work and the realities of the SPE context. During SPE, teaching becomes more than just knowing content knowledge, rather knowing how to use knowledge to meet the needs of students is fundamental to integrating knowledge and practice.

This initial study explores the contribution of a prolonged Wider Field Experience (WFE) in affording pre service teachers with valuable opportunities to practice and rehearse their knowledge and skills in readiness for the SPE. The WFE was carried out in a rural primary school located in an Indigenous community. The study reports on ways in which the pre service teachers engaged in a community of teaching practice that supported a culture of sense making and effective learning through immersion in authentic practices.

Introduction

Research shows pre service teachers tend to avoid rural and remote placements because of the misconceptions they have about life and employment in those communities. (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1999; Bush Tracks Research Collective, 2006; Hemmings, Kay & Kerr, 2011). Inverarity (1984) delineated these misconceptions into four distinct concerns; physical isolation in relation to geographical position and harsh climatic conditions; interpersonal isolation, experienced through distance to family and friends; cultural isolation, associated with feelings of dislocation from the community expectations and values, but also related to the lack of facilities in terms of entertainment; and finally, intellectual isolation, associated with the lack of access to professional development activities. Boyland (2004) also includes financial isolation, which relate to the lack of employment opportunities for the partners of remote teachers.

Perceptions of rural and remote SPE

There is sufficient evidence in the literature highlighting the depth and effect isolation has on pre service teachers. Researchers acknowledged that pre service teachers are often faced with loneliness

both personally and professionally and experience anxiety linked to readjustment difficulties in dealing with the new culture of their SPE (Sharplin, 2002). Other concerns noted in a series of case studies that examined the needs of beginning teachers in rural and remote schools included issues such as language problems, behaviour management worries, and insufficient sleep due to anxiety and pedagogies that did not seem to fit the needs of the students they were teaching. Combined with the misconceptions regarding rural and remote placements are some harsh realities for pre service teachers. A number of studies have highlighted the financial apprehensions that have a limiting effect on the degree that they may consider a rural and remote SPE. Halsey's (2006) list includes issues such as the additional cost of housing in the rural and remote placement, while pre service teachers continue to pay rent at their usual place of residence, increased costs associated with living in a remote area, the cost of travelling to and from the rural and remote location and the potential for lost income through absence through the period of the SPE.

In examining the lives of pre service teachers placed in rural and remote settings, studies that examine issues of teacher emotion and the psychological effects on teachers' lives following a cultural relocation becomes important. The notion of fit between a pre service teacher and a rural SPE is one which can be found in studies directed at managerial psychology (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Studies, for example Joslin (2002), suggest that there are parallels between the culture shock that teachers experience when transferred to an international setting and that which is experienced by those relocated to rural and remote settings. Transfer to international settings, like work relocation to rural settings within Australia, tend to focus on both the stability and length of the placement; efficacy of the teaching pedagogy and cultural adjustment. While much of the literature that focuses on person/environment - fit is developed with the intention of developing criteria for selection of the appropriate staff, the value of the work in this area is that it also allows an insight into the sort of qualities that higher education institutions can try and develop through their initial teacher education programs.

Sustainable SPEs focus on the relationship between pre service teacher perceptions and the qualities of a workplace in relation to the degree of satisfaction. This approach is useful as it allows for an examination of the influence of efforts to prepare pre service teachers in terms of their perceptions in addition to developing their skills and knowledge. A common feature of programs in preparing pre service teachers for remote placements is the provision of enlightening and educative experiences that are designed to change the largely negative perceptions many pre service teachers have about rural and remote placements, in other words to build a person-environment relationship through deeper understanding of local culture. These 'rural and remote experience programs' seek to introduce pre service teachers to life in rural and remote schools through a short period of SPEs. However, critical to this approach is the notion of going beyond the simple physical placement in a school, to include a process of engaging with rural and remote communities.

It is evident that the connection between school and community relationships in rural settings is one that features strongly in the literature regarding the preparation of pre service teachers for rural and remote placements (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). In a study that compared the community-school relationships in large urban schools, compared to those that are found in rural communities, two clear factors that set rural schools apart from their city counterparts were identified. Firstly, the significance of the whole context and the fact that relationships were inclined to be a precursor to educational change. As such, teachers in rural communities were required to consider not only what happens within the school context, but to also embrace relationships with the wider community (Lester, 2011). In relation to the relationship approach pre service teachers need to have an awareness of the power of the teacher-community relationship and they need to be trained in harnessing it. However, studies in the area of pre service teacher preparation generally focuses on the social relationships within the classroom (Hemmings, Kay & Kerr, 2011) rather than the effect of pre service teacher-community relationships. There have also been recommendations for training in areas such as communication, collaboration and participation, negotiation and social and cultural diversity to prepare teachers for their teaching and community roles (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006).

A particular concern for pre service teachers is the mismatch they experience between their course work and the rural and remote experiences that follow during the SPE. It could be argued these difficulties stem partly from a one size fits all style of curriculum development that is incongruent with the conditions found in rural and remote schools, leaving pre service teachers inept and without the necessary skills to carry out the level of teaching required (Green & Reid, 2004). These concerns are heightened for pre service teachers who are placed in schools in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This is evidenced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, 2010 -2014, cites the 2007 Staff in Schools survey, reporting that 31% of early career primary teachers and 40% early career secondary teachers evaluated their pre service teacher education as inadequate in terms of preparing them to teach children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The characteristics of effective teachers of Indigenous students identified by Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington & Richer (2000) were: ability and interest in understanding Indigenous culture and community; preparedness to engage socially with students and their families; and willingness to invest time with students outside of the classroom to establish relationships with them. With regard to the teaching content it was important to include culturally relevant material in the curriculum. Effectiveness in Indigenous schools requires pre service teachers who present as high standard graduates and with clear ethics, values, and attitudes (Buckley, 1996).

Research framework

The Australian Professional Standards (APS) for teachers “describe the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high quality effective teaching in 21st Century Schools” (QCT Standards p2). The four career stages of the Professional Standards serve as an effective process for identifying and acknowledging a teacher’s proficiency in the profession along a continuum – initially as a graduate to a lead teacher. Initial Teacher Education Programs are assessed against the Professional Standards and it is therefore necessary for all Programs to ensure that graduates meet the graduate stage of the Professional Standards for accreditation and teacher registration. The coursework undertaken by pre service teachers is linked closely to the Professional Standards in order to develop relevant and expected teaching competencies. The SPE courses in particular, focus on the Standards with the criteria for successful completion of the SPE generally being assessed against the three domains of teaching (Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice, and Professional Engagement).

Evidence gathered from the students at the completion of SPEs during debriefing sessions suggests pre service teachers are anxious about acquiring qualities that allow them to “adapt” into rural and remote communities. They are particularly concerned about meeting two of the focus areas in the APS; Standard One and Standard Two. The two Standards are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Australian Professional Standards at Graduate Level

Standards	Focus	Graduate Level
Standard 1. Know students and how they learn	1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
Standard 2. Know the content and how to teach it	2.4: Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of, and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, culture and languages.

Many of their concerns have been centred on the lack of opportunity. Firstly, to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and community members, and secondly, to observe and discuss with teachers the strategies they implement for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

students. More importantly, they are anxious about the perceived mismatch between what they have learned and the realities they may experience when they are required to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Research questions

The aim of this initial study was to explore the notion of “building a fit” with a group of pre service teachers in relation to developing appropriate cultural and pedagogical knowledge, skills and abilities commensurate with effective teaching in Indigenous student through participation in a Wider Field Experience (WFE). The WFE is a compulsory component of the Education Program and pre service teachers are required to complete the necessary hours in a minimum of two different contexts. The WFE itself is not assessed in the same manner as the SPE. However, the pre service teachers are required to provide a critical reflection on their WFE and comment on how the experiences have advanced their development in demonstrating the APS at a graduate level.

For this research paper the perceptions and learning gained from the WFE were considered, and structured around the following research questions.

RQ1: What were the pre service teachers’ initial perceptions about doing a WFE in a school located in an Indigenous community?

RQ2: What have pre service teachers learned from WFE in a school located in an Indigenous community? (Pre service teachers’ initial perceptions compared to reality).

Research method

It is important to use appropriate methodology to obtain information to address the research questions. This is because different research methodologies have more effective applications in different circumstances. Therefore, careful consideration of the research methodology is a significant part of the research process. According to Corey (1954) researchers in the education profession routinely use action research as a process to reflect on and improve their practices. The process of action research includes the three stages of conceptualisation, implementation, and interpretation (McLean 1995). Therefore, by using action research to evaluate the impact of particular educational practices, improvement can be implemented by the practitioners to achieve more effective practices, superior curriculum and an enhanced learning capacity for students.

Case studies are designed to have a focus on a few key issues that are central to understanding the topic being evaluated (Tellis, 1997). The process of conducting a case study is described by Yin (1994) as consisting of four phases: design, conduct, analyse evidence and develop conclusions. As such, by conducting a case study approach, conclusive evidence surrounding the key issues that are fundamental to the research questions can be identified. However, it is necessary to note Corcoran, Walker and Wals (2004) warn that case study methodology can provide unsatisfying results if there is a lack of consideration and understanding of the research methodology. This suggests that a case study approach has the potential to conclude and provide relevant information regarding the research questions only on the condition that the research methodology which generates information and data from the case study has been properly and thoroughly understood. This exploratory study is based on an action research methodology that used a case study approach to gain insight into a small group of pre service teachers’ initial perceptions about completing a WFE in a rural school located in an Indigenous community. The pre service teachers examined their own perceptions and practice prior to the WFE and then during the WFE in the school context. Using critical reflection they identified knowledge they had gained and could be used to improve their perceptions and practice.

Sample of pre service teachers

In this case study, six pre service teachers volunteered to participate in the Embracing Culture: Enhancing Literacy Development (ECELD) WFE project funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). General information about the pre service teachers is shown in Table 2. The project is being carried out at a Band 8 primary school located in an Indigenous community in Queensland. There are approximately 190 students with all presenting as Indigenous and over half the staff are Indigenous. The objective of the ECELD team is to work closely with the staff, teacher aides and students to enhance literacy development.

Table 2. General information about sample of pre service teachers

No	Gender	Age	Background	Education Program	Year of enrolment
1	Male	30-35	Mining	Bachelor of Primary Education	Second year
3	Female	20-25	School to University	Bachelor of Primary Education (2) Bachelor of Business/Bachelor of Education	Second year Third year
1	Female	25-30	Hospitality	Bachelor of Primary Education	Second year
1	Female	40-45	Workplace Health and Safety	Bachelor of Primary Education	Second year

Procedure

The case study used qualitative methods for gathering data. A questionnaire using open ended questions, and reflective journals were used to explore the pre service teachers' initial perceptions and learning from the WFE were completed by the six pre service teachers. The pre service teachers travelled to the school for five school terms and they spent one day a fortnight working with the students, a total of 25 days. The interviews were held in the evenings prior to going to the school and immediately after. The pre service teachers' journals were completed independently.

Data was collected from the completed questionnaires and field journals and analysed for dominant themes. The data analysis showed there were four key themes across both the questionnaire and journal responses, they were: Language and culture; Facilities and equipment; Social and psychological; and Learning behaviours and competencies. Data was allocated to each of the themes to enable comparisons between pre service teachers' responses to perceptions, realities, and identity.

Results and discussion

Pre service teachers' initial perceptions about the WFE

The responses made by the pre service teachers with regard to their initial perceptions about the WFE context offer insight into some of their concerns. Prior to this rural school WFE each of the Primary pre service teachers had completed their first year SPE in local primary schools. The pre service teacher enrolled in the combined degree had completed two of the SPEs in local secondary contexts. All pre service teachers indicated that they had no previous differentiated experience teaching Indigenous students during the SPE. Pre service teachers' responses are shown in Figure 1 and Table 3. The responses suggest that while the pre service teachers readily volunteered for the WFE experience, there was genuine apprehension about what they would experience.

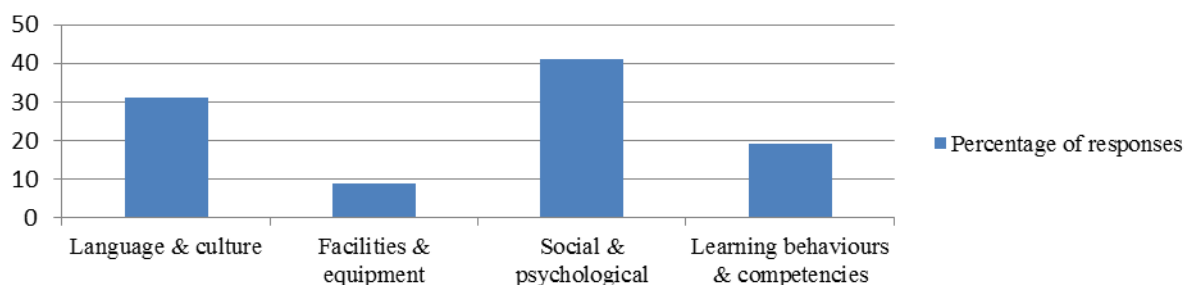


Figure 1. Pre service teachers' initial perceptions about the WFE in a rural school in an Indigenous community

The pre service teachers' initial perceptions about undertaking a WFE in a rural school with Indigenous students were not positive. Two main areas of concern were their own safety and security within the town and the school precinct and their unfamiliarity with Indigenous language and culture. Social and psychological (41%), and unfamiliarity with Indigenous language culture (31%). None of the pre service teachers had previous or extensive association with Indigenous students or communities and their thinking about the communicative and intellectual capacity of the students was derived from information received from third parties.

Table 3. Pre service teachers' initial perceptions about the WFE in a rural school in an Indigenous community

Theme category	Examples of pre service teachers' comments
Language & culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racist towards me; • language differences; and • cultural differences
Facilities & equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no technology and ITC support; and • lack of facilities
Social & psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anxious; • fearful; • uncertain; and • violent environment
Learning behaviours and competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students would not have the same literacy as the local schools; and • lack of motivation.

Pre service teachers' realities of the WFE

The pre service teachers generally leave the University on a Sunday afternoon and stay overnight in local accommodation to allow them to be at the school first thing on Monday morning. For four pre service teachers this has meant re-arranging work schedules; and for the other two pre service teachers it has meant relying on family members for support with children. However, their enthusiasm for attending has not diminished and arrangements to travel to the school are made to allow everyone to attend. The pre service teachers were asked about their perceptions about the WFE context after spending considerable time at the school. Pre service teachers' responses are shown in Figure 2 and Table 4.

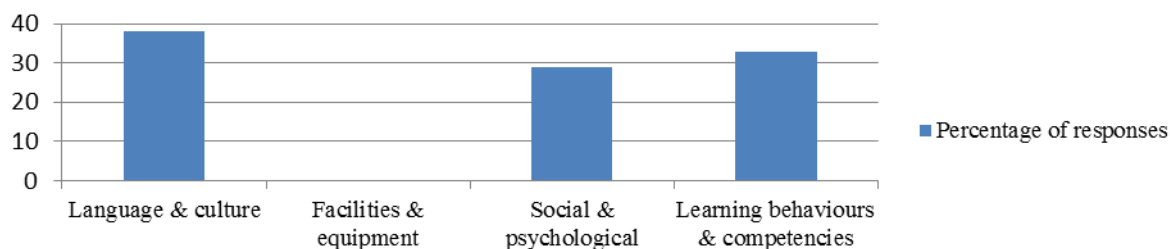


Figure 2. Pre service teachers' realities of the WFE after extended engagement in a rural school in an Indigenous community

Following an extended period of WFE at the school the pre service teachers became familiar with Indigenous culture, community, and students. Friendships strengthened. The pre service teachers developed an informed appreciation for the differentiated experiences at the school, and their perceptions changed. An analysis of the data showed there were no longer elevated levels of anxiety about teaching in an Indigenous community, no longer concerns that language and culture would limit their teaching, and no longer a view that student behaviours and competencies would impede learning and teaching. Pre service teachers demonstrated positive understandings of language and culture (38%), social and psychological matters (29%), and student behaviours and learning (33%).

The pre service teachers had learned about meeting the needs of diverse learners in their course work. However, they felt that the opportunities to engage face-to-face with the Indigenous students extended their learning about cultural diversity beyond what they had achieved through assessment tasks in their course work. Pre service teachers believed there had been an improvement in their pedagogical understanding of the NAPLAN tests and the use of Curriculum to Classroom (C2C) as they became more familiar with the Indigenous students, their cultural background and the curriculum being implemented.

Table 4. Pre service teachers' realities of the WFE after extended engagement in a rural school with Indigenous students

Theme category	Examples of pre service teachers' comments
Language & culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • value of Indigenous staff in sharing information about the cultural background; • significance of cultural knowledge; • home language and school language matters; • cultural literacy is so important; and • can't teach and learn if there are gaps.
Facilities & equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • technology and resources is available and in use
Social & psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students and staff are so welcoming and helpful; • friendly and interested in us working with them; • this is not what was expected; and • so different from what we have learned on campus.
Learning behaviours & competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flexibility is essential in teaching; • behaviour management strategies need to be effective; • planning needs to focus on differentiated learning to accommodate individual learners; • planning needs to focus on differentiated learning to accommodate individual learners; and • better understanding of meeting APS 1 and APS 2.

These responses indicate that the pre service teachers have settled into the WFE context. It highlights the value of cultural knowledge, awareness of cultural literacy and engagement with Indigenous staff. While some areas such as behaviour management; differentiation and use of technology are evident in

all school contexts, specific accommodations and modifications to suit Indigenous language and learning styles that were used by the staff added much to the pre service teachers' learning. The reality for the pre service teachers were less concerns about language and cultural issues, and social and psychological issues, and higher satisfaction levels for the student behaviours and demonstrated competencies compared to their initial perceptions prior to undertaking the WFE. The differences are shown in Figure 3.

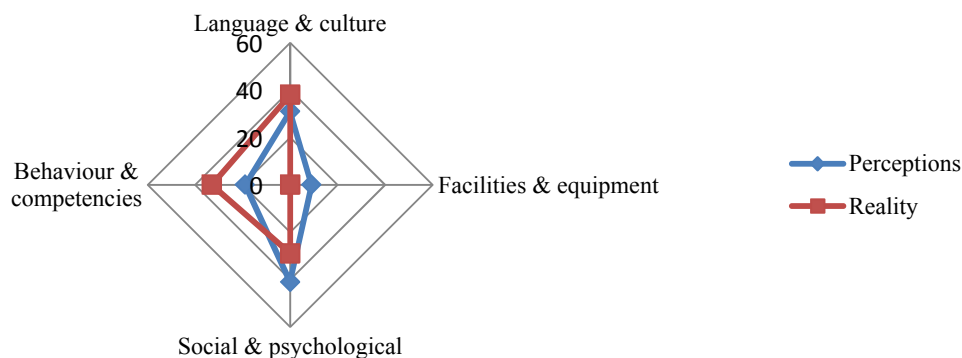


Figure 3. Comparison of the pre service teachers' initial perceptions and the reality about doing a WFE in a rural school in an Indigenous community

There was a noteworthy shift in the pre service teachers' initial perceptions about what they expected to experience and the reality of their experiences during the WFE. The initial perceptions or indeed as the pre service teachers labelled them, 'misconceptions' occurred because of a lack of cultural knowledge about the context and their inexperience interacting with Indigenous students and staff. The initial perceptions had been a consequence of what the pre service teachers called, "recycled information" limited information they had acquired as children and young adults prior to enrolling at the university. There were considerable discussions between the pre service teachers about their initial anxieties, fears and feelings of uncertainty and how these initial feelings were needless and unjustified. Pre service teachers' comments on the relief they felt after they had visited the school were associated with the mismatch between their expectation and the reality of the context. As the pre service teachers settled into the school on subsequent visits, they became familiar with the cultural background of the students and they felt more confident about implementing strategies to accommodate the students' cultural needs.

The value of social interaction in this study is quite significant because it is evident that the pre service teachers have developed a genuine friendship. They engaged in high levels of communication with each other by regularly making time to catch up on campus, through telephone calls and through social media. Communication has been particularly effective because the relationship between peers is one of friendship. In situations such as this one, peers act as "critical friends" who provide a safe and trusting forum for advice and support. The shared communication can also be a useful motivator for powerful self-reflection and the cultivation of collaborative work practices. This has been evident in the journals kept by the pre service teachers (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing and Le Cornu, 2003). As a consequence of the shared communication and interactions this WFE group of pre service teachers represents a learning community (Wegner 1999).

Teacher Identity and what pre service teachers learned from WFE

Data analysis suggested how the pre service teachers saw themselves in the teaching profession as a result of the WFE experience. Pre service teachers' responses across the four themes are shown in Figure 4 and Table 5.

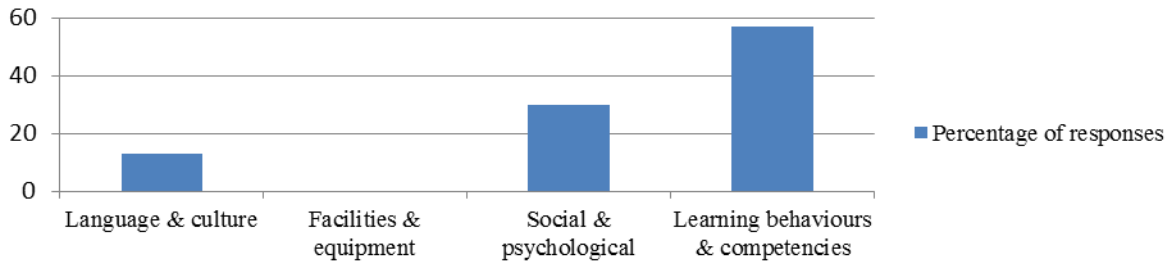


Figure 4. Teacher Identity and what pre service teachers learned from WFE in a rural school in an Indigenous community

Table 5. Teacher Identity and what pre service teachers learned from WFE in a rural school in an Indigenous community

Theme category	Examples of pre service teachers' comments
language & culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> more knowledgeable about cultural contexts; and cultural literacy
facilities & equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> able to use school equipment
social & psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> confident and better prepared; more knowledgeable about cultural contexts value collaboration and sharing and learning together; and more resilient
learning behaviours & competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> able to be more flexible; understand how to differentiate; understand planning, teaching and assessing for Indigenous students; and have high expectations of myself and students.

The responses, showing a substantial shift in pre service teachers' capabilities in applying theory about classroom management and achieving outcomes of student learning suggest that the WFE experience strengthened the pre service teachers' commitment to teaching. The experiences have extended their capacity for teaching allowing them to be better prepared for working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Figure 4 shows a strengthening of pre service teacher identity for the themes learning behaviours and competency (57%), and better adaptation to the theme social and psychological (30%).

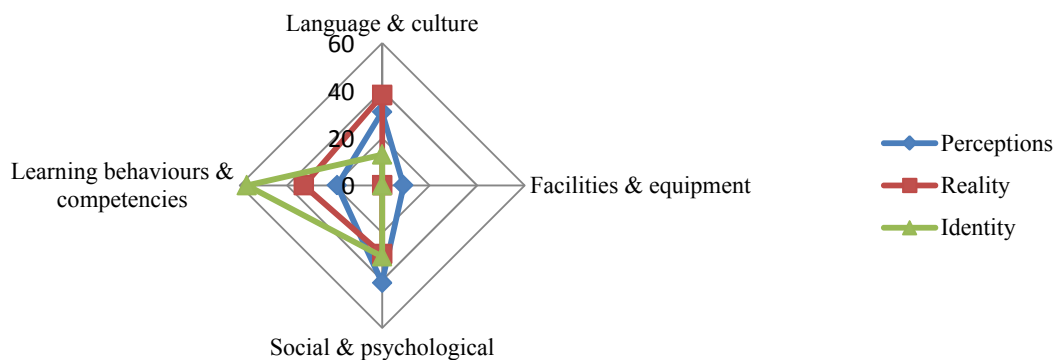


Figure 5. Comparison of the pre service teachers' initial perceptions, and reality about doing a WFE in a rural school in an Indigenous community

The sample of responses gathered from this exploratory case study suggest the group of pre service teachers valued the WFE which afforded them with continued opportunities for extending their teaching capabilities through firsthand communication and interactions with Indigenous staff and students. Moreover, the WFE presented genuine and enriching cultural experiences that they could reflect on and use to construct new knowledge and understandings necessary for undertaking future SPEs in rural and remote locations. This extended WFE experience sits comfortably with Sleeter's (2008) recommendation that teacher education programs contemplate the value of interaction with communities in which schools are situated in order for pre service teachers to develop the necessary cultural understandings to teach effectively.

According to Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite (2010), teacher identity is usually regarded as, 'an ongoing process of construction' where multiple sub identities can be assumed based on the contextual influences and the relationships teachers engage in. The dynamic nature of identity suggests that it is always potentially changing and that social interactions play a central role in constructing and reconstructing identity. A preliminary look at teacher identity for this group of pre service teachers suggest the contextual influences and the cultural relationships they engaged in during the WFE has impacted positively on the construction and reconstruction of their identity as teachers.

Conclusions

This exploratory case study provides valuable insights into a range of issues impacting on rural and remote SPEs that have not been discussed fully in the light of the expectations for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students recognised in the Australian Professional Standards.

The introduction of the Australian Professional Standards in 2014 at a Graduate level has highlighted the need for pre service teachers to demonstrate their knowledge of the histories, culture and languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and to be cognizant of the impact of culture on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The findings of this study suggest that the WFE completed at a school in an Indigenous community could enhance the cultural knowledge and understandings of pre service teachers. The WFE could also align the learning undertaken by pre service teachers in their course work with the reality experienced during SPEs in rural and remote locations.

This case study was undertaken to explore the initial perceptions a group of six pre service teachers had about completing a WFE in a rural school located in an Indigenous community. The results are not extensive, nor can the findings be generalised to a wider population of pre service teachers. However, the connection between community and university partnerships in providing pre service teachers with extended WFE in rural and remote communities as an effective opportunity to develop cultural knowledge should be further examined to reduce the mismatch between the perceived preparation pre service teachers receive and the realities of teaching in rural and remote communities. It is anticipated that data will continue to be gathered and further investigation of the community of teaching practice established by the pre service teachers will continue in order to fully examine the extent of WFE and the benefit obtainable to pre service teachers.

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