Teaching at the cultural interface: Establishing a responsive classroom through the authentic engagement of a teacher, Aboriginal students and parents

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Abstract

This presentation is a co-constructed dialogue between Helen, a teacher, who until recently, was a new scheme secondary teacher appointed to a remote school in western NSW, and Kevin, a teacher, curriculum manager and post graduate researcher. During 2012 they met regularly to discuss Helen’s professional and personal journey as a teacher, and her endeavours to reach out to students and parents with a view to affect an authentic change in the classroom experiences of students in her care. At its core are reflections on, Aboriginal Education; the provision of quality educational experiences to all students; efforts to ‘know’ and build connections into the community; and views on teacher capacity within such a context.

During her 3 years, Helen explored ways to connect with the community so as to deepen the investment that she felt she could make in her students’ learning, while also enriching her own family’s life experiences. Helen, like all other colleagues, was asked to respond to the demands of delivering educational programs that would ‘close the gap’ – a space she thought of as an educational chasm, that would ever widening if there wasn’t a major intervention. It was only later that she came to realise was that her need to establish a meaningful educational relationship with students and parents was paralleled by a largely hidden, but even greater need on their part for the same thing. Through story, reflection and evaluation, this presentation demonstrates how, along the way, Helen learnt the meaning of building teacher capacity; what it doesn’t take to connect with community, and the meaning of ‘getting these kids to learn.’

Forward:

This paper is written as a co-constructed dialogic engagement. It takes place between Helen, a Music and English Teacher who was newly appointed to a small, remote K – 12 central school in western NSW, and Kevin, an Aboriginal educator, and until recently, Inspector of Aboriginal Education in the NSW Board of Studies. They met in 2011 through the Board’s support of a long-term curriculum project to implement a Paakantji language program in schools in western NSW. In the following year, Kevin had many conversations with Helen and other teaching staff, parents and Aboriginal support staff as part of a larger critical ethnographic research program undertaken as part of his doctoral research; a project that centred on teacher and Aboriginal community engagement. These conversations covered a wide range of issues facing teachers, especially those that touch on the personal and pedagogic challenges of teaching in schools with students who had experienced little educational success. The conversations also focussed on their own journeys of teaching in rural and remote schools.

This paper has been written primarily in a form that emanates from within an Indigenous framework, and is representative of the many professional discussions that occurred over that intense 12-month period. Some references to key texts have been added where appropriate within Kevin’s responses to assist placing this dialogue within an academic framework. Italicised text represents the dialogue between Kevin and Helen, with additional unitalicised text provided to identify context and additional analytical commentary. Its dialogic form and structure is based on reflexive engagement that came out of Helen’s professional concern in realising her inability to meaningfully engage with her students.
This period of deep reflexivity saw an emerging culturally responsive pedagogy develop, which had immediate outcomes for both Helen, and the students she taught.

**Dialogue**

**Kevin:**
*(Beginning this yarn)* It's great to have this opportunity to have this discussion, even though we are separated by almost the width of the state, on where our thoughts are about how teachers, such as yourself (Helen) settle into the early years of teaching in the more remote parts of the state, and, in particular, how you and other colleagues have understood the task of teaching Aboriginal students. I like that we have chosen to continue where we left off in early 2013, when we spoke often about the personal and professional journeys of teachers when they enter the profession after they are posted to hard to staff locations.

This concept of a written yarn has a long lineage, and as Tyson and Melissa (Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011) have shown that this way of co-jointly exploring complex ideas, and developing an emerging shared understanding can be achieved as a result of this interactional dialogue. We are also able to draw upon the work of Martin Nakata and others, who have written about how the constant negotiation of identity is the result of the actions of Indigenous agency at what he calls the cultural interface (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012). This space is both real and imagined, and is where students, teachers, and Aboriginal parents constantly find themselves re-negotiating their own social and cultural position and understanding of the environment in which they find themselves. This interaction has the potential to critically illuminate the mechanisms by which Aboriginal people have been ill-serviced by governments and their agents, through insights and reconceptualised understanding that has come by way of our own action and engagement. We draw on the construct of an Indigenous Standpoint which, simply stated, gives credibility to the epistemic knowledge of ‘knowers’ and provides insights into the worlds we inhabit through establishing a ‘critical stance on the social order in which knowledge is produced’ (Pohlhaus, 2002).

This dialogical approach to the development of shared meaning has a long lineage both within the western academy –and, within the worlds of my own ancestors, whose epistemic worldviews were affirmed through the constant ontological engagement of knowledge holders. So I see that we are walking this path between the written, scientific and somewhat antiseptic understanding of the outside observer of these events; and the active, authentic, personal and live experiences of teachers, students and community members who for moments in time, rub shoulders in the classrooms and footpaths of small rural and remote schools across the country. So we are drawing together the knowledge of our elders, both western and Aboriginal, and looking to give meaning to the experiences you’ve had while teaching.

**Helen:**
Yeah... This yarn is a great opportunity for me to talk about my last few years teaching here. I can now begin to understand the issues that challenged me in my thinking about how I wanted to construct an effective and purposeful experience in my teaching, and how that would look to both myself and the children I taught. I realise that while this notion of professional fulfilment is very subjective, it is something that many teachers have a common agreement on. Upon reflection of these last 3 years, I believe that my professional fulfilment came through the planning and implementation of thoughtful,
engaging lessons that students can embrace, the completed tasks students undertook, and that they are proud of what they have learnt. Further to this, meaning can be defined as lessons that potentially have a long lasting impact on their lives beyond the classroom.

To paint a picture: sometimes I would draw on my experience as a vocal performer, to just sit there and sing as gently and purely as I was able: to merely be an example, a possibility of what might lie within my students. Sometimes, this was the only way I could reach my students, and sometimes this was the only thing that seemed to carry them into a quiet and calm space. It wasn’t just my expertise as an educator that informed my teaching practice, but a combination with my passion for making and sharing music with all of my students.

As an educator, I have always strived to present a quality experience for my students; where quality means really connecting with students through the content I am teaching. To do this I have had to carefully consider how I communicate with students, the manner in which I manage my behaviour and students’ behaviour and the delivery of the content.

In late 2010, some months before accepting my recent appointment in ‘Somewhere Central School’, I sat and wrote about my own personal teaching philosophy. The last time I had done this was probably about 15 years ago, so it seemed timely to pull this into focus, given I was returning to teaching after 8 years away from a school classroom. I wrote that I wanted to:

“Build relationships, cultivate respect, and encourage excellence – for my students; and incorporate inspiration and enthusiasm into my teaching as this ultimately leads to [student] enjoyment. I also acknowledge the importance of ‘knowing’ the subject content – and to use the curriculum to find inspiration and assist in providing clear teaching and learning objectives.

Looking back on this, I realise how much more committed I am to the central themes of building relationships, knowing the subject material I am teaching, and finding inspiration in what I teach. While this personal definition has not changed much over the past three years, what has changed is my value base. Prior to arriving here, the internal platform from which I implemented this philosophy was deeply shaped by my experience as a musician and music educator and defined within known familiar contexts. Simply put, I had a belief that ‘everyone can enjoy making music; that all people are capable of being a musician; and, in particular, my delivery of this music education was enough to engage anyone.’

Kevin:

You have raised so many ideas here as you speak about both those personal aspirations and beliefs that teachers develop around their notion of teaching, and those that they park further back in their professional construct of different groups of students, the fear or desire of certain geographic location, and seeking opportunities to move students beyond their epistemic comfort zone. You spoke of this ‘kit bag’ of attitudes and beliefs about your teaching and its implied positive impact that it would have on the students you were about to meet as you made that journey beyond the city boundaries.

The history shows these towns and villages have witnessed the tensions that underpin the divergent worlds of the farm ‘cocky’; the rural workers; those who work for the shire; the government ‘blow ins’
who variously reside in police, hospital or teacher housing; and the Aboriginal communities who ‘live in’, but ‘reside out’ of these towns (Wallace, Boylan, Mitchell, & Streckfuss, 2008).

But of somewhat more interest to this discussion was how you articulated how you wanted to see yourself, the confidence you had in your pedagogic practices, and the desire to impact on the education of the students. You know, to many Aboriginal people, teachers and other outsiders appear to have a narrow understanding of these communities into which they are parachuted, where Aboriginal people see that they are often typecaste by a set of standards, beliefs and attitudes. These are often fashioned out of books, television documentaries, undergraduate assignments and well meaning but often out of touch pre-service programs that do little to provide the particular skill set needed to be effective in these environments (Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). Too often the initial enthusiasm of teachers is all too quickly replaced by a crippling disillusionment about the school, the kids and their communities.

The difficulty for a community like this, whose schools have experienced the consequences of being victim to the revolving door of teachers coming and going, is that they are constantly having to work and understand new teaching staff whose beliefs, fears, and levels of cultural dissonance or disinterest in the community impact are seen to have a negative impact on student achievement (Bishop, 2003). Experience has painfully taught us that such teachers often only stay for short periods of time, and that their professional views of the schools are constructed on deficit theorising about the students, their capacity, the parents and the location into which they have been appointed (Lonsdale, 2008; Yarrow et al., 1999). However, the community also acknowledges that teachers are but one source of these deeply situated deficit understandings of rural life, Aboriginal community aspirations, culture, student capacity and parent interest in their kids and their futures (Letts, 2008).

What community members have most often articulated is that they want to be understood and positively engaged with, instead of being ignored and or stereotyped (NSW AECG & NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). So it’s not so surprising that your story of this point of time in your professional life mirrors the experiences of others that have made this journey before you.

The community’s aspirations are more similar than dissimilar to your own and other parents, but having said that, they want teachers to understand our sense of connectedness to our languages, culture, family and the importance of being present on our own Country. While these are pretty much universal aspirations, communities say over and again that they don’t want programs that further distance their children from culture, or assimilated by culturally subversive curriculum and practices, and the lack of teacher knowledge about the importance of culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b).

So the question that we are both skirting around at this point is: are teachers destined to repeat the ground hog day experiences of those who have ventured into these towns in the past? Or, are there ways that we are better able to assist teachers such that they are professionally emboldened; to develop the pedagogic capacities that will have an educational impact, and the professional presence that you mapped out for yourself?

Helen:

These were the very issues that transfixed me when I arrived at the school and steeled myself as I prepared my first lesson for a group of year 8 students. However, as much as I wanted this to work, my hopes and expectations about this educational and cultural undertaking were tested. Lesson after
lesson after lesson, I came away feeling confused, frustrated, clumsy, alienated and isolated from these students.

I continued to ‘operate’ completely from within my ‘lens of comfort and protection’ for some time, before one day realising I had tried every ‘trick’ and strategy I could think of. This point of despair was a culmination of weeks of battling largely on my own, initiating half successful behaviour management strategies. I had attempted having humorous and humourless encounters, attempted engagement through listening to music, improvisation, and often just standing there and watching the dynamic occurring between this small group of mostly Aboriginal students around myself. I even resorted to really outrageous engagement strategies such as presenting content using postmodern theatre language performance techniques, movements and props in my attempts to steal my students away from the constantly disengaging conversations they had with peers and their resultant resistance to learning. In this I played the actor where I played the outrageous performer, desperately seeking their attention to draw them into the lesson I was yearning to present but couldn’t. They weren’t interested and I didn’t seem to have the skills to create it.

My one point of sanity in these early days was the company of the other creative arts teacher who taught in the room adjacent to mine. I walked into my colleague’s classroom after one such lesson – I was mentally exhausted and lacking a sense of self worth. I just blurted out ‘these kids just don’t want to learn from me, they don’t believe they are musicians and they’re not interested in trying anything I present to them.’

My colleague heard me, but for a moment just looked at me. He had been at the school for some ten years, teaching art and gradually over time drawing these children into his art world, finding ways to get them to open up to expressing themselves through the visual arts. I had become fascinated and at times envious of the work he seemed to be able to get his students to produce, and the connection he had with them.

He heard what I said; but then pointedly asked me what I was going to do about it. He sat with me as I thought for some time. And then I said.. “Try something else”.

Up until this point, I had always seen Helen the schoolteacher as a separate and parallel role that was somewhat divorced from my own reality and knowing. Playing out the ‘script’ learnt from my own very different experiences and which generally supported those pedagogic practices that had previously worked for me and were used by colleagues, the department and the curriculum. What constituted the general consensus was often the considered views of my similarly ill-experienced colleagues, the Principal, and school executive, most of whom themselves were only in their first decade of teaching and first promotions. But, you know what, that even with this broad agreement, I and others knew that this just wasn’t working for me or the students!

Helen, the community educator who had worked part time while raising her young children was ruled by a largely different set of values and script. The growing angst that came with the daily reminder of my impotence in the classroom drove me to re-orientate my thinking about what and for whom I was teaching. It was then that I changed my focus, and I began to implement the planning strategies that I had developed and successfully used as a community music educator and I began to find my feet. I now tried the teaching strategies and content that Helen the community educator had successfully used; but even this did not have the deep impact that I needed, to regain the purpose I was striving for.
In the meantime, I had been introduced to the Quality Teaching Framework, initially by my in-school supervisor and then with the support of a university mentor who was employed by the school. Upon reading this document for the first time, I excitedly realised I had a detailed language which described what I felt I knew was necessary in my practice as a teacher. ‘Draping’ my planning, lessons, and assessment over this framework contributed significantly in enabling me to reconceptualise who Helen the educator was.

The combination of ‘reviving’ Helen the community educator and being able to use the language of the Quality Teaching Framework combined to open my eyes to what I needed to do. I had a moment or epiphany, to begin to engage these hard to reach students. It had to feel real for me as well as for my students. Being an artist, I measured this in terms of the literal emotional feeling and sensation in my body. I needed to feel excited and inspired by what I was doing and I wanted my students to feel this also.

As a beginning point I asked questions that challenged my own self-concept. Thinking back now, I wanted to focus on four questions: (a) What have I learnt so far about my students? In particular, I wanted to reflect on their cultural, social, academic, intellectual and emotional contexts. Following on from that, I considered (b) What do students already know? Then I would ask myself: (c) What do they need and how could I possibly give it to them? And finally, (d) How do I make this learning real? Or in other words, what is it that I need to do to manifest this in authentic quality teaching experiences? Questions such as these were predicated on my sense of worth as I genuinely felt that anything I had or did was of little interest to them at this point in time.

It was from these questions that I began to make notes and this was how I came to design my first teaching program specifically for these students, called “The Muso Inside You – Expressing The Power”, which finally saw us turn from being a class to a class of learners.

It hooked them. They were initially tentative in their responses. But slight smiles took the place of indifference or snarls, and a silence that came from their engagement emerged in the classroom.

Kevin:

Can I jump in here? You have now introduced some unique, positive and self-learnt concepts that touch on important matters such as the critical importance of peer supported mentoring and teacher reflexivity (Richardson & Placier, 2001). It is interesting that you saw that you were unable to move forward until you were able to critically challenge your own idealised, but culturally situated ideas about what good teaching entailed.

Fang (1996) in her review of the research on teacher beliefs argued that without there being what you called an ‘epiphany’ - or that eye opening experience where common sense or accepted practices is exposed to the realities of the environment of the classroom, teachers can’t be liberated from past pedagogic practices or make substantive and authentic change to their teaching practice.

As you now know, the high levels of misinformation, the lack of knowledge about Aboriginal students and the resultant high levels of student resistance make for an almost unchallengeable barrier for teachers.

These so often lead to deficit theorising, which is destructive to quality teaching and which are fundamentally fed by teachers’ under-theorised beliefs and attitudes, and their understanding of those
issues that impact on students they teach (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). There are some commentators such as Barton et.al (2004) and Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) who have noted that these theories about students and their communities are historically situated within deeply situated colonial discourses of race superiority. They argue that these are located in the seen and unseen practices of the state and its agents over minority students, who are epistemically harassed to accept the inevitability of their inferiority, and loss of identity, culture and presence wrought through the policies of assimilation and multiculturalism (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Helen:**

You know, I felt that I was taking a big risk at this point. I had to step out of what I had found had always worked for me, both in the type and delivery of content. I had to admit to myself that it was a possibility that when my students were repeatedly saying “Miss this is boring, this is shit, I don’t understand, I don’t want to do this” or behaving in an utterly passive but non-compliant manner – that from their perspective as the learner, there may be truth in these challenging assertions.

It was scary, because I felt as though I was ‘giving in’ to my students’ tantrums around not wanting to work, or do the work. And if I gave in now, was I ever going to have ‘control’ in my classroom with them again?

**Kevin:**

This issue of control is tricky, because on the one level it is about ensuring that students are provided with the learning environment that is conducive to their collective learning. As you noted, teachers see themselves as squarely in control, and as owners of what happens within their classrooms.

There is considerable research (Britzman, 1986), which unquestioningly asserts that classroom management is one of the critical elements of professional practice that is a key measure of teacher capacity.

However, while this seems to be a professional truism, it leaves unquestioned the issue of teacher engagement with students, cultural relevance, curriculum content and associated pedagogic practices that diminish, isolate and/or seek to epistemically assimilate those students and communities that have not accepted some of the fundamental premises upon which teaching is based (Amosa & Ladwig, 2004; Berryman et al., 2013; Sefa Dei, 2013).

This is a trap that teachers need to be wary of. For as you have identified through your own internalised or reflexive thinking on the making of a ‘good’ or ‘effective’ teacher, this is largely dependent on the teacher being able to understand the students in front of them, the development of quality teaching and learning that is purposeful, achievable, responsive and that resonates with students (Hattie, 2003; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008)

**Helen:**

It felt as if there would be anarchy and that I would lose what little respect I had with the students. How would I be able to work in such an environment if this is what could happen? This was a moment of great self-doubt – to stay with something that patently didn’t work – or striking out, but with the prospect of failure.
I was mulling over this unit “The Muso Inside You – Expressing The Power”, which I knew was far from directly addressing syllabus outcomes for Stage 4 Music. I hadn’t gone to the syllabus and taken a ‘suggested topic’ such as Rock Music or Mediaeval Music and written or borrowed a traditional unit of work to ‘execute’ what I thought I was supposed to do. What I did was put my students squarely into the centre of my planning process and in answering the aforementioned questions, I came up with content and an implementation strategy that would meet the students at their point of learning. From my ‘Helen the Teacher’ eyes, it was difficult for me to articulate how this program would be seen to close the learning gap, as articulated within ‘government policy’ documents. But what I did do was provide lots of practical hands on activities and opportunity for student reflection, discussion and best of all – their engagement in learning.

What this unit of work did was give my students licence to explore what kind of musician they were in a safe and fun environment. I surmised from their responses that they had possibly never even thought of themselves as musicians, or of having been given much positive control over their own learning. Where once these students had sought to outdo each other with their antics of resistance and non-compliance, they now sought to actively participate in this new experience of being a participant if not an active partner in their own-guided learning.

And the learning felt real. It felt real because I knew I had taken into consideration everything I was learning about my new students, and there was an air of excitement in the classroom, which came from both within my self and the student’s clear engagement with the subject content and their assessment. I had found a point of learning where we could meet. I consistently reminded them that this time in the music room was about them finding out who they were as musicians. Often this was as simple as stating to them quite randomly that:

“Remember what we are doing this term, the name of this unit is “The Muso Inside You, Expressing The Power”, this is about you seeing yourself as a musician, be it as a listener, a player or a creator.”

And then moving back into the activity, which may have been creating a riff to a backbeat, or being an audience to their classmates.

Now we had a chance to connect because I was not pushing a content driven agenda, I was inviting them into a space to musically express, wherever they were at, and where I was able to provide truthful, sensitive feedback.

On reflection, this unit of work was far from perfect, or well designed. However what happened though the course of teaching it was that I – the person who was fearful of letting go the control over curriculum and pedagogic practice – now understood that I needed to remind myself that this was about the students exploring who they were as musicians; that I needed to listen respectfully to the various ways that they communicated their feelings about what was happening, and evaluate our progress after each lesson; and practice being with my students, with the variable moods they were in on any given day or lesson, knowing that I didn’t need to always immediately ‘find a solution’ to how they were expressing themselves or behaving.

How did this look in the classroom, the final lesson in this unit? Each student one by one recorded their own keyboard part and ‘rap rhyme’ in front of me, being willing to make mistakes, correct them and proudly keep a copy of what they had done. Each student sitting in the room participated, and one by one had their recording played loudly for the whole class to hear without running from the room.
with embarrassment, or dive under the table from overwhelming sense of shame. But most importantly they engaged in a lively educational conversation about feelings, their learning journey about music, and what they heard and what the project had meant to them.

What I learnt was that it is more than okay to engage in taking risks with my programming, planning, pedagogic practices – and most importantly, relevant assessment that was situated in responsive learning. I had seen the learning potential for both myself, and my students to grow this interaction into a learning relationship and that surrendering ‘control’ of the classroom environment did not mean losing face or the respect of my students, and will not result in anarchy, dysfunction or chaos.

Kevin:

Yeah, the concept of a shared leadership in learning appeared to be new to you all. The thought of being a teacher not ‘in control’ of the experience would be enough to do most people’s head in. Yet what you were doing was commencing the development of a genuine context driven framework for learning - a home grown responsive learning experience.

There are some key African American and Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 2014), Bergeron (2008) and a range of Māori educators from Aotearoa (Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Bishop, Berryman, Cavangh, & Teddy, 2007; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008), who have worked collaboratively with teachers in designing and implementing teaching programs that have been based on establishing a schooling experience that is responsive to the cultures and ethnic identities of minority students in school. The importance of being in control is pushed to the background, as the teacher learns to work more closely with parents and the wider community in the development and delivery of the educational experiences of students. That you arrived at this same jumping off point is intriguing, and in itself instructive about the genuineness of what you learnt through being professionally reflexive (Berryman et al., 2013; Sefa Dei, 2013).

Helen

My moment of epiphany and subsequent professional fulfilment did not happen in isolation at ‘Somewhere Central School’. I now want to come back to the pivotal role of my mentor and colleague.

He has been teaching visual arts at the school for some 10 years, while also being an active producer of art himself. He and his students were producing amazing results, in an educational environment where they took ownership over both the creation of work within their own unique visual style, free of ‘shame’. Thinking about the significance of his support through the countless hours of conversation around education we had, my vicarious observation of his lessons and how his pedagogic practices encouraged me to follow through bravely on my ideas for education in this setting – using intuition, reflection, quality teaching, over and over again, with increasing courage.

Through example, and constantly reminding me to listen to my students, and not to personalise their behaviour, I found my strength. He put me in touch with my drive and inspiration to take risks with my teaching style, and to put my students at the centre of my planning. How did this happen? Usually when actively listening to me, through sharing our stories of breakthrough and from me observing his lessons.

The other significant ‘narrative’ in all this was the need to find a connection with home - to my students’ families. I figured out early on, the difficulty in finding a connection between school and
home. My perception was that the two were separate to each other, and my experience was that engaging parents was particularly challenging.

Yet I knew that this was crucial to the success of what I could see my students experiencing. I was aware of the history of disconnection between the school, teachers, parents and the wider community. I supposed that if their parents knew what learning was occurring, and then the experiences of the students would be more empowering and motivating.

So began my efforts in the first instance to make real connections between the parents and myself.

This meant a fitness regime of evening walks with my family around town, saying hello to everyone we came across, whatever their demeanour on the day. We never stopped doing this and after two years, there were some, and then more smiles being returned. It also meant only calling home or writing letters home when I had some genuinely positive or constructive feedback to share with my students’ carers, instead of only calling home when students were misbehaving or something ‘bad’ had happened.

I looked to attend as many community events as I could and always made a point to chat to as many parents and elders as I could whilst there; even if it were just standing there in silence together. A highlight was the establishment of a “Parents and Toddlers” music class. This was instrumental in meeting so many of my students’ significant relatives and became a bridging tool for me to connect with possibly all of my students to varying degrees.

Kevin:

The importance of deep engagement with parents should not be underestimated (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bishop et al., 2007), and especially the very positive impact on parents and their valuing of school and schooling itself (Christenson, 2004). But having said that, we must not undervalue the encompassing effect and impact that these relationships have on teachers.

One of the other significant issues or challenges, is to question the underlying assumptions that are often used by schools and their systems when speaking of these partnerships in terms of the schools building or enhancing community capacity. This is described in terms of fixing their capacity. I, and others have argued that instead of community deficit, we would argue that it is school and teacher’s capacity that needs to be mentored and supported, such that they are able to buck the history of their collective disconnection from communities that they have little knowledge of (Lowe, 2011).

Helen:

In retrospect, my passionate and possibly needy desire to connect as a dweller and educator in this town probably gave the community more than one good laugh. But it did happen. I learnt how to enjoy making fun of myself, through performance as a songwriter, and thus providing a public platform in which I could expose my fears and actions. And I gradually became more comfortable within the community. Though I never claimed to fully ‘know’ these people who live here, my relationships with many reached a point where it visibly enhanced my connections with my students: learning about their ‘place’ in respect to how and to whom they were related in this close knit community – this was priceless information that helped me appreciate the depth of their multi-layered ‘connection’ to kin and Country. But in coming to learn this, it inadvertently helped me to learn how to be myself and to know what an effective educator could possibly look like.
Kevin:

So, on reflection...?

Helen:

This yarn has helped me see myself as the educator that I believe I am growing into, and to realise that to enhance the learning process, I needed to 'get out of the way of my students’ learning’ by surrendering to both the needs, and the unique culture I find myself in. Within this educational context I found myself compelled to put aside the comfort and safety of the beliefs and attitudes with which I had come, and rethink what a quality responsive education needed to encompass. Embracing these processes were a huge risk for me. And the enrichment and fulfilment I found as a teacher, and a learner, has been deeply affecting, perhaps even life changing.

Kevin:

Yes, the pressures of being posted to schools such as you have described can in many cases weigh young teachers down. For many the experiences are filled with a terror that comes with being so far out of their comfort zone, and the professional failure of knowing that student underachievement continued under their watch. Yet strangely these experiences are worn as a badge of honour once teachers have left - You can hear them say ‘I’ve done my three years out west’ and ‘ I’ve taught Aboriginal kids... You know, we tried our best... ’, and ‘You’ve got no idea how hard that was.’ Yet for the parents, this is a conga line – new teachers in and jaded teachers out. Little changes except for that small band of extraordinary teachers who commit to the kids, who sometimes stay more than a couple of years, and who in doing so, have a very different experience. So your comments and introspections are a revelation, both about the personal and reflexive nature of change, and the impact that such change can have on enhancing both teacher and student engagement in the classroom.

Helen:

There are without doubt more difficult and challenging educational contexts to work in than where I was at 'Somewhere Central School’, but it was tough enough, as I have described. The relentless pressure of the situation I found myself dealing with on a daily basis caused me to train my focus increasingly on what it was in my work as a teacher that I could find freedom and fulfilment in.

I had a goal, and my goal was: What is it that I, as a teacher, need to do in this school to manifest real learning?

Perhaps this is the single most valuable tool I came away with in learning what the questions were that I needed to ask, and then asking them. In other words, that to set myself up for success as a teacher, I needed to have a goal that I knew I had a chance of achieving.
References


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1 The Quality Teaching Framework (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003a, 2003b) had been implemented in NSW government schools in 2003. It had been drawn on the experiences of implementing a similar pedagogic program in Queensland in the late 1990s. The key elements and attributes of effective quality pedagogy drew in the research of Newmann (Fred Newmann, Marks, & Gamon, 1995; Fred Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996), who had undertaken an meta analysis of educational research on effective teaching and learning strategies.