Beginning Teaching in Rural-Remote Schools:

Implications for Critical Teacher Development

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This article reports the findings of the authors conversations with beginning teachers posted to rural-remote schools in Western Australia. The stories provide some insight into the personal-professional dilemmas, tensions and constraints that new teachers encounter in the transition to teaching and living in rural-remote communities. The article explores the implications of these stories for teacher education, in particular the challenge of producing critically reflective practitioners who are committed to not only understanding their social and cultural contexts but challenging and changing it.

INTRODUCTION

This article reports the findings of our conversations with a group of beginning teachers posted to rural-remote schools in Western Australia. As we listened to their stories we were struck by the range and intensity of personal-professional feelings, emotions, and struggles as they adjusted to their new teaching situations. We heard about the initial experiences of arriving at their new communities and settling into their accommodation; the first week impressions about teaching, language differences, and classroom management; and the on-going dilemmas of classroom management, professional relationships, community relations and cultural differences. In all of this, we were keen to find out what constellation of capabilities enabled them to negotiate and survive these complex personal-professional dilemmas, tensions and constraints (Woods et al., 1997) in the transition to becoming classroom teachers.

As teacher educators we also wanted to know how our own practice might better prepare beginning teachers to not only make sense of their new social and cultural circumstances but to challenge and transform it (Smyth, 1991, p. 333). For us, it was important to understand how our graduates negotiated the use of critically reflective practice within the dominant “discourse of practicality” so evident in their stories (Smith & Zantiotis, 1989, p. 110; Down & Hogan, 2000). Based on previous research into
beginning teachers we were acutely aware that they would be isolated from professional support and collegial contact, feeling inadequate in terms of teaching and administrative tasks, worrying about their ability to manage school-community relations and suffering from culture shock (Crowther, et al., 1991, p. 18; Cameron, 1994). Against this backdrop, we set out to examine the experiences of these young teachers as they proceeded to negotiate their new personal-professional situations. In doing so, we pursue the following questions: How do beginning teachers negotiate the transition from university study to classroom teaching in rural-remote schools? How do they understand, experience and respond to their new environment? How do they manage personal-professional dilemmas, tensions and constraints? What are the implications for critical teacher development?

THE STUDY

The research adopted a qualitative case study approach to illuminate the experience of beginning teachers located in rural-remote schools of Western Australia (Van Manen, 1990). We invited the first seven graduates appointed during term one of 2000 to participate in the study. Each of the participants agreed to keep a regular journal describing their place and work, together with their personal-professional reflections. As Hogan (1997, p. 3) explains, personal accounts of 'lived experience can generate alternative ways of seeing through their capacity to hold multiple and contradictory meanings, their potential for irony and humour, their acknowledgment of emotion and their 'locatedness' within real times and places'.

At the outset we anticipated difficulties with communication, since some of the graduates were appointed to extremely remote locations. We also realised that the realities of teaching and associated time constraints may prevent them from writing regularly. To take account of these anticipated difficulties, we carried out regular informal telephone conversations, with general inquiries about their progress and anecdotes. Extensive notes were taken during these conversations and together with the interview notes and journal entries we generated a rich body of data. Our research participants included: Jane and Jessie, two young single women teaching in small rural towns; Jerry, Jack and John, three young single male teachers working in a remote town school, remote community school and a rural town school respectively; Jim a male teacher in his mid thirties, with family teaching in a remote community school; and Jill who was in her mid thirties, with family, teaching in a rural town.

All participants described the shock of the first day (“Oh, my God, they’re mine”). In the words of John “a blur of children, paper and money - lunch money, swimming money, rolls, school administrative requirements, names, parents at the door, and afterwards, a shockingly untidy desk with paper work everywhere”. Some mentioned having no memory of the first day at all, other than their program and daily plan. John, Jane and Jim all mentioned their feeling of administrative incompetence during their first days of teaching.
Jim, Jerry and Jack, who were in schools with English Second Language speakers, described how they had great difficulty understanding the children for the first few days. They said that this was not really a problem because the children tolerated them, laughed at them, and were happy to slow down and speak word by word for their new teacher. By the end of the week, the teachers were beginning to understand the children’s English without having to ask them to slow down or repeat themselves. All graduates said they were physically and mentally exhausted during week one. They mentioned having to drag their bodies around after lunch, and just wanting to go home to sleep. The causes of their exhaustion included insufficient sleep (and inability to sleep due to anxiety), being physically drained due to the journey, cleaning houses and settling in, and the physically demanding job of teaching. The other problem facing these beginning teachers as the week progressed, was a lack of confidence in dealing with behaviour difficulties (“Are all grade fives like this, or is it just me?”). Several had severe behaviour difficulties that they could not and did not deal with effectively at the time, or for the remainder of term one. In the remainder of this article, we want to focus on the experience of two of our participants (Jane and Jim) to explore some of these issues in greater depth.

JANE’S STORY

Jane was an academically talented student who received a High Distinction for her final Assistant Teacher Program (ATP) where she spent 10 weeks in a classroom with increasing amounts of autonomy. She was appointed to a small rural town, a ‘hard to staff’ school where one third of the class comprised Indigenous children. Jane was one of a relatively large number of qualified teachers in the school with a number of Aboriginal Islander Education Workers (AIEWs). Jane had a very bad start to her new appointment, largely due to unsuitable accommodation. To complicate matters, she was unable to gain access to her classroom until the Sunday before school started, and when she did, it was very untidy. It took her all of Sunday to tidy the classroom. As a consequence, she was unable to prepare for her first day of teaching and became extremely anxious and stressed with events. The first day with the children was very trying as they were highly energetic. Insufficient books and stationery had been ordered, so on the evening of the first day she had to arrange the late ordering of supplies. As the week progressed, she had increasingly severe problems with the behaviour of children. She was exhausted and felt like she was constantly ‘fighting battles’: first over her accommodation, and then with the children. Each night for the first few weeks, Jane wept for hours, and did not get to sleep until 3am or later. Her exhaustion made it even more difficult to establish harmonious classroom relationships. Jane reported that she would have left her school during the first week, if she had not had what she described as “the best principal in the world”. She says he was very supportive and caring.
Jane's dilemma

Staff at Jane's new school, including experienced teachers had difficulty managing student behaviour. Jane decided that she wanted to implement a 'firm, fair and fun' classroom management philosophy even though she was feeling stressed, exhausted, and lacking in confidence. Jane described the children as 'livewires', but several appeared to be angry and were overtly disruptive of everything she did. They fought physically in the classroom, and had thrown scissors and chairs at Jane and each other.

It was the well-intentioned advice of one teacher that created a dilemma for Jane. In seeking advice on how to deal with one of the girls in her classroom she was told:

All the children in that family are like it, there is nothing you can do. The children live with daily domestic violence and alcohol abuse, and they are not fed properly or regularly. Further, every time a teacher calls the mother in to speak about her children's behaviour, the mother always tries to refute what the teacher is saying and says she (the mother) can't do anything. It is best to ignore the girl, and send her to one of the other teachers for a break when you can no longer tolerate her.

According to Miller (cited in Woods et al., 1997, p. 18), dilemmas such as this are 'a particular type of predicament which occurs when the pressing alternatives available, or serious obligations we face, seem so evenly balanced that it is hard, sometimes impossible to make a choice'. They are 'social situations in which people are pushed and pulled in opposing directions'. As Billig (cited in Woods et al.) explains:

The characteristic of dilemmas are revealed as fundamentally born out of a culture which produces more than one possible ideal world, more than one hierarchical arrangement of power, value and interest. In this sense, social beings are confronted by and deal with dilemmatic situations as a condition of their humanity.

At the time, Jane was mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted as well as feeling confused. During a research telephone conversation, it seemed that Jane had accepted the advice of her colleague, without question.

Jane's creative resolution

On reflection, Jane recognised that the advice of her peers was in fact a large part of the problem. In terms of her own personal-practical theories (Ross, Cornett & McCutcheon, 1992) about teaching and learning she felt uncomfortable with the dominant deficit view of children so prevalent in the school. At this point, Jane realised that her dilemma was 'situational, and involved freedom of choice and creative resolution' (Woods et al., 1997). In response, Jane formulated a strategy for developing a positive relationship with the young girl based on mutual respect. This strategy, in her words, met with such "extraordinary success" that she invited the girl's mother to the school to share in her daughter's progress. From this point, Jane systematically developed and implemented similar kinds of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for other children in the class, and
gradually made inroads into the classroom management difficulties she faced. By the end of term one, she said that she still had some bad days, but regularly had productive, happy days in the classroom, and was developing positive working relationships with each child. Her overall approach during term one was to develop a positive, nurturing set of classroom relationships emphasising children’s self-esteem and social skills, so that she could successfully extend their learning in all areas.

Although Jane initially experienced her dilemma in a very personal and painful way, through discussion with us, she was able to formulate a number of creative responses. This transformation enabled her to better understand herself as a professional actor in a context of multiple complexities. While classroom management dilemmas continued for Jane, she felt far more confident in her own capacity to creatively resolve classroom behaviour problems.

**JIM’S STORY**

Jim was a male teacher in his mid thirties, with a young family. He was located at a remote community school where he rated his accommodation as extremely good. Jim was also academically capable and had received a Distinction for his ATP. He was one of four qualified teachers with several AEIWs and one principal (non-teaching) at the school. During week one, Jim encountered difficulties in managing the behaviour of children, a situation that deteriorated over term one.

**Jim’s tension**

At Jim’s school, the principal and teachers were all newly appointed to the school. In Jim’s view, the principal was out of touch with modern teaching methods and seemed to have little idea of working effectively with the Indigenous community. Jim had considerable difficulty managing the children’s behaviour, as did the other more experienced teachers at the school. The principal had not taught Indigenous children for twenty eight years and did not want the staff to use student-centred learning. Jim felt strong pressure from the principal to teach the children to ‘sit up straight and be obedient’. Jim’s preferred student-centred approach to managing classroom behaviour conflicted with the principal’s views and this was causing friction in their relationship.

Woods et al. (1997, p. 21) argue that tensions such as Jim’s ‘invade the inner self, arouse stronger emotions, are more personal than professional and offer limited choice and strategic coping’. They explain:

> Tensions pull or stretch, perhaps in many opposing directions at once, and are less amenable than dilemmas to professional action. Stress and strain is the result. Tension is the product of trying to accommodate two or more opposing courses of action where choice is limited or circumscribed. Thus, dilemmas become tensions where factors beyond the teacher’s control impede decision-making. The teacher resolves tensions strategically, often on a political rather than educational basis.
In the fourth week of term one, Jim reported that he was confident enough to circumvent the principal’s advice but was not sure how long this would continue. He said that he felt very confused and uncertain about the classroom situation, as well as how he should proceed with his relationship with the principal. In short, Jim was struggling not only with the behaviour of the children but the principal’s advice that went against his own professional judgement. He had been in the process of trialing student-centred learning strategies which seemed to be working but he acknowledged that things were far from perfect in his classroom. As there were signs of improvement, Jim wanted to persist with this approach. He believed that if the children were given opportunities to pursue their interests they would be more likely to cope with school thus creating the possibility of developing constructive relationships and productive classroom learning.

Jim faced a situation that offered him limited choice. He could persevere with student-centred learning strategies or comply with the wishes of the principal. Jim believed his professional judgement was not valued or respected by the principal. This created a personal tension for Jim that felt increasingly difficult as the days passed. Jim’s relationship was further complicated by the principal’s apparent lack of respect for the wishes of the local Indigenous community. Jim reported that the principal had decided that the school day would start earlier in the morning, against the expressed wishes of the community. Jim felt that the principal’s actions precluded the likelihood of parents feeling happy about coming to the school. Jim believed that the parents might see this as a whole staff decision, so he felt uncomfortable about the potential impact of this on his working relationship with the community.

In situations of this kind, ‘survival, personal adjustment, resistance and stress are common features’ (Woods et al. 1997, p. 23). According to Woods et al:

Constraint implies compulsion, force, repression of natural feelings. Constraint operates against the choice of perceived better alternatives. It thus restricts the free resolution of dilemmas and removes even the element of choice involved in tensions, and determines their transformation in particular ways.

Jim’s survival

Clearly, Jim’s teaching was a stressful experience. He resisted the principal’s advice but reported that he was surviving on a day to day basis in the classroom. He could only exercise his professional judgement in the context of an agonising relationship with his principal in an extremely remote community with little professional support other than his conversations with us. This was a particularly difficult situation for Jim to resolve at this early stage of his teaching career. He was managing but not enjoying his teaching.

For Jim, the only course of action available was resistance. Given the behaviour problems in the classroom as well as his own teaching philosophy, he could not comply with the principal’s advice to teach the children to ‘sit up straight and be obedient’. Unfortunately, Jim did not have the same level of support from his principal as
experienced by Jane. In Jane’s case, she respected her principal and felt that she could discuss issues with him. She was free to develop responses to her difficulties and implement them in a way that she felt comfortable with. In this sense, she understood that the principal regarded her as a professional colleague. Both Jane and Jim were high calibre graduates. They were confident, dedicated pre-service teachers and strong, determined individuals.

There are several lessons arising from these stories worth noting. Firstly, principals can and do make a significant difference to the experience of beginning teachers. Secondly, critical friends/researchers can play an important role in mediating the experience of beginning teachers. In Jane’s case, this included a long conversation with us about a particular classroom behaviour dilemma. In hindsight, our intervention was crucial in enabling Jane to see the socially critical nature of the choices available to her. In Jim’s case, we were able to offer moral support in his decision to resist the principal’s direction and strengthen his resolve to implement his own teaching and learning strategies. Drawing on our experience so far, we want to move on to consider the pedagogical implications of these stories for our own practice as teacher educators committed to producing critically reflective practitioners.

CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Given Jim’s and Jane’s experience as beginning teachers we should not have been surprised that their main focus was on achieving both technical and interpretative competence in the classroom. According to Bullough and Gitlin, technical competence emphasises how well they were employing teaching techniques and how they were coping compared to others around them, whereas interpretative competence focuses upon exposing and clarifying personal meaning (Bullough & Gitlin, 1991, p. 38). However, as Bullough and Gitlin point out, there is a real danger of technical and interpretative reflection ‘becoming nothing more than therapy, a form of disconnected but interesting indwelling’ (1991, p. 38). As a counter, we share Bullough and Gitlin’s view that critically reflective practice provides a means of ‘moving beyond the individual to confront the hierarchical and alienating structures currently found in most schools’. As Sleeter and McLaren (1995, p. 6) explain:

The dominant culture of schooling mirrors that of the larger culture in so far as teachers and students willingly and unwittingly situate themselves within a highly politicized field of power relations that partake of unjust race, class, and gender affiliations.

For us, critically reflective practice provides the space for challenging taken-for-granted views about teaching and learning. As Ball (1995, p. 266) argues, teachers need ‘a language for challenge, and modes of thought, capable of defamiliarising present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the intervention of new forms of experience’. In this project, we have adopted dialogic and problem-posing approaches as a means of challenging everyday habits, routines and practices (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1987, 1996). Smyth, (1991) puts it well:
It means teachers engaging in systematic, individual as well as social forms of investigation or inquiry into the origins and consequences of their everyday teaching so they can overcome the fatalistic view that change is "impossible for me", and seeing that circumstances can be different from what they are. It means moving from a "passive ... dependent, [and] adaptive" (Fay, 1977, p. 220) view of themselves and their situation, to one in which they are able to "analyse and expose the hiatus between the actual and the possible, between the existing order of contradictions and a potential future state" (Held, 1980, p. 22). In short, it involves teachers becoming politically involved (Carlson, 1987; Lightfoot, 1973) in working towards changing the frustrating and debilitating conditions that characterise the work lives of themselves and their students.

The challenge facing us and other teacher educators interested in this kind of project is to find ways of systematically embedding these ideas into our own teaching so that "it is understandable, theoretically and practically appealing, and politically effective" (Sultana, 1995, p. 132; Adler, 1991). In undertaking this work, we have found Smyth's vision of a 'critical learning community' especially useful in our efforts to create an ethical, moral and educative alternative to traditional teacher education programs (Smyth, 1998, p. 7). Smyth elaborates in the following way: 'critical' in the sense that it challenges the conventional and taken-for-granted aspects of teaching and learning; 'collaborative' because learning is a process of talking to one another; and 'community' because people are connected by shared commitments, interdependencies, mutual obligations and normative ties. These ideas resonate well with our own desire to 'develop and extend mutual understanding, reason and the ethic of caring' as the cornerstones of our work with pre-service teachers (Bullough & Gitlin, 1991, 40-41; Noddings, 1984; Nias, 1989).

As we struggle to embed these principles into our own practice we regularly confront the "complex identity formation that student teachers face as they move through their induction, constantly shaping and reshaping their ideas of what is good and true and meaningful" (Levine-Rasky, 1998, p. 3). We agree with Levine-Rasky when she argues that it is important for student teachers such as Jane and Jim to "interrogate issues of dilemma, ideology, social location, contradictory values and the competing sources of discourse". As one of us has argued elsewhere, 'personal experience, often an incident or problem that confronts student teachers during their teaching experience or within their own or their family's schooling offers an opportunity of linking their local and personal issues with public and structural changes' (Down & Hogan, 2000, p. 20; Mac an Ghaill, 1996).

Like many beginning teachers, Jane and Jim had little experience of the cultural, political and religious beliefs and values of rural-remote Indigenous communities. Furthermore, they had no experience of how to relate to the local community in the development of culturally appropriate curriculum (Yarrow et al., 1999, p. 5). As Connell (1994, p. 140) points out, teachers need to see "the way curriculum empowers and
dismemperes, authorises and de-authorises, recognises and mis-recognises different social groups and their knowledge and identities’. Despite Jane’s and Jim’s strong commitment to promoting fair schooling practices, they nonetheless found themselves ‘teaching against the grain’ (Ng, 1995) in a school system that often created ‘frustration and despair rather than transformation of people, situations and structures’ (Gultana, 1995, p. 132). For these reasons, we believe that it is important for teacher educators to be reflexive about their own practice and the extent to which it either enables or constrains students critical understanding of the ethical and political dimensions of teaching, in particular the ability to negotiate social difference.

Teacher education has traditionally responded to these needs in a variety of ways. Typically, it involves the inclusion of multicultural education courses and the provision of direct student experience intended to foster prospective teachers with skills, attitudes and knowledge to function effectively in schools (Heslop, 1996; Partington, 1997). Yet, as Phuntsog (1999) argues, the current conceptualisation and implementation of such programs is predicated on questionable assumptions and premises. Multicultural education as a separate course is assumed to be sufficient to address a plethora of diversity issues from the ethnic identity of a student in a rural remote town to that of transforming curriculum for social justice and for challenging cultural hegemony. Phuntsog claims that “though diversity programs may, at their best, barely scratch one’s deeply rooted cultural beliefs, students are expected to undergo profound personal transformation that may enable them to question their long-held views about teaching and learning”.

We agree with Levine-Rasky’s (1998) argument that without due reflection, application and contextualisation, internalisation of values and knowledge about cultural diversity is unlikely to occur for teacher candidates. As she explains:

It is prevalent among prospective teachers to persist in interpreting social difference and inequality through the lens of meritocracy in which success is directly related to individual achievement and talent irrespective of environmental or broader social factors such as racial discrimination, poverty, unequal treatment in public institutions, language barriers and other patterns of oppression. The effects of this orientation is justification of patterned, negative judgements and actions against children and their capabilities (p. 2).

In response, Sleeter and McLaren (1995, p.18) explore the connections between multicultural education and critical pedagogy as a way forward. As they explain:

Critical pedagogy and multicultural education question how we name and construct ourselves as well as others. Naming brings to visibility and existence that which was formerly hidden or kept silent. For instance, naming as racist, sexist, or patriarchal certain relationships in the classroom helps to provide for students a context in which those issues can also be discussed in the outside community and larger society.
As we discovered in our conversations with beginning teachers, the time-honoured practice of journal-keeping is central to this larger project. According to St. Maurice et al. (1995, p. 92) this genre has the potential to “recount defeats as well as victories within their political and cultural circumstances”. They go on to argue that ‘a journal that addresses personal, institutional, social and cultural factors can serve as a record of conditions that affect discourses and practices. It collects such perceptions for analysis, establishing continuities where they might not be otherwise perceived’ (p. 93). Through journaling, both Jane and Jim reported significant opportunities to ‘connect otherwise disparate moments for reflection, analysis and sharing’. While we do not wish to underestimate the difficulties of developing reflective thinking among pre-service teachers (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1998) we believe journaling can provide significant moments to produce alternative readings of their practice as well as our own. Case writing in particular is an important strategy in helping students to ‘document, describe and demonstrate attributes and performance … which focus on the dilemmas, complexities and exemplary practices of teaching’ (Cherednichenko et al., 1997, p. 20; Sultana, 1995, p. 133).

CRITICAL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

We would like to conclude this article by identifying some general guidelines and practical strategies to help inform our own thinking and practice as teacher educators. In doing so, we are mindful of Goodman’s (1991, p. 73) point that the ‘relationship between school practice and socio-cultural context within which it exists is complex, and no one strategy can be expected to fundamentally alter the present system’. Goodman, drawing on Zeichner and Liston (1987), goes on to warn us against assuming an ‘overly romantic view of giving teachers more control over their work’. He argues that ‘promoting reflection and inquiry among pre-service teachers is a difficult goal given that many of them have not had any experience at seriously reflecting upon school knowledge or life experience’ (Shor, 1987). In a similar way, Brookfield (1994, p. 203) alerts us to the ‘dark side’ of doing critical reflection and the importance of paying attention ‘to the way adult learners feel their way through critical reflective episodes – to understanding the visceral, emotive dimensions of the process’ (Ellsworth, 1989). Nonetheless, we remain optimistic about the potential of critically reflective practice to help beginning teachers in their struggle for more democratic forms of teaching and learning, particularly in rural-remote communities already grappling with profound educational and social disadvantage (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000).

In this task, we have identified the following list of general guidelines and strategies to help inform our planning, actions and reflections as teacher educators:

- **Embedding critically reflective practice in all aspects of the curriculum.**
  As Goodman, (1991, p. 74) suggests “our work must be comprehensive ... In order to have a more meaningful impact upon future teachers, this orientation
needs to be the focus of seminars, supervision, foundation courses, field experiences, and methods courses”. He warns that without a coordinated effort our effectiveness will be severely limited.

- **Developing a shared understanding of the core values of critical pedagogy.** A key challenge for us is to develop with colleagues and students a shared understanding of the core principles, values and assumptions underpinning critical pedagogy and the implications for our own practice. According to Gay (1995, p. 167) the main characteristics of critical pedagogy include: “critical dialogue, representative voice, resistance to domination and oppression, emancipatory pedagogy, knowledge as power, social reconstruction and transformation, the democratization of the educational process, pluralism without hierarchy, counterhegemony, and the legitimacy of subjective realities”.

- **Creating space for our own collaborative reading, reflection, and writing.** Gore (1991, p. 253), reminds us, that we need “to facilitate our own reflectivity and should be wary of inconsistencies between our message and our example”. Modelling our own critical reflectivity is very important as we endeavour to affirm, celebrate and critique our own practice for students.

- **Modelling collaborative learning in our classrooms.** If we are going to challenge our students to think about alternative views of knowledge we must begin with our own pedagogy. Britzman (cited in Comeaux, 1991) argues that ‘teacher education’s conception of knowledge can promote a view of the teacher as either technician or intellectual, and the extent to which values are rendered explicit can either inhibit or encourage a more critical pedagogy’. In this context, the notion of teachers as “transformative intellectuals” deeply engaged with their own re-education and transformation is a pivotal cornerstone of the way we need think about and organise our classrooms. (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Kincheloe, 2002).

- **Developing the methods of ethnographic research among our students.** Ethnographic case studies can provide opportunities for students to reflect upon, critique and discuss local and personal issues in relation to broader structural categories such as class, race and gender. (Teitelbaum & Britzman, 1991, p. 179; Sultana, 1995, p. 133; Mac an Ghaill. 1996). We believe case studies of this kind can provide a rigorous intellectual foundation for our programs as we endeavour to build collaborative community based investigations.

- **Building school–university partnerships to develop culturally sensitive practices.** Yeatman and Sachs (1995, p. 45) argue that “Partnerships enable new kinds of professional learning to occur … and also help in the creation of new, more powerful kinds of knowledge to inform teaching and schooling ...”. According to Sachs (2003, p. 75) partnerships can also facilitate: negotiated expectations; collaborative planning; sharing of expertise; diversity of
perspectives and view points; knowledge generation; and development of trust. This means, for example, extending collaborative teaching arrangements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues, and creating collaborative action research teams on projects of common interest to rural-remote communities.

- **Developing purposeful, specialised and context-specific school based experiences for pre-service teachers in rural and remote communities** (Yarrow et al., 1998). We believe that the provision of intensive school based experience provides a significant opportunity for pre-service teachers to consciously make connections between critical education theory and practice in challenging rural-remote situations (Hogan & Down, 1998). We believe such experiences are best facilitated by adopting a critically reflective practice approach that enables students to systematically describe, inform, confront and reconstruct their own practices (Smyth, 1989).

- **Maintaining on-going collegial personal-professional support for beginning teachers.** Our experience in this project demonstrates just how important on-going personal-professional relationships can be for beginning teachers. Sachs (2003, p. 69) argues that activist teacher educators can be involved in a number of ways: advising; issue and problem identification; spreading ideas; providing alternative perspectives; evaluating programmes; and advocacy. Some of the participants in this study may well have surrendered to the largely conservative and individualistic practices of the school system or even left the teaching profession if it had not been for our intervention and support at critical moments in their professional lives.

**CONCLUSION**

The experience of beginning teachers in this study reinforces for us the urgency of creating and sustaining a coherent approach to the preparation, induction and on-going professional learning of beginning teachers as critically reflective practitioners. In this article we have attempted to share something of our own journey as we endeavour to better understand our own practice with a view to improving it. At the same time, we are mindful of the constraints confronting teacher educators and beginning teachers. Firstly, we find ourselves ‘teaching against the grain’ (Ng, 1995) in a seemingly dominant “discourse of practicality” so evident in education in general and teacher education in particular (Bullough & Gitlin, 1994). According to Rivera and Poplin (1995, p. 225) traditional pedagogy, “uses practices which, by necessity, must control, instruct, monitor, reward, and punish students as they acquire appropriate content”. These pedagogies assume learning is rational, sequential, and logical and that students act in response to self-interest.

Secondly, we find our own workplace in a state of “crisis”. We share with beginning teachers: a growing trend towards centralized control; greater emphasis on vocationalism
and instrumentalism; the move towards treating education as a commodity; enhanced links between the corporate sector and education; and increased de-skilling of the teaching force (Sultana, 1995; Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; Cooper, Hinkson, & Sharp, 2002; James, 2000; Coady, 2000; Smyth, 1995). Despite these problems, we are of the view that 'crises carry with them another more promising alternative, for they generate the material conditions that make mobilization and the organisation of counter-offensives possible'. They create opportunities to engage in "truly professional action, where teachers engage in educational and other social movements to struggle for a different form of life" (Sultana, 1995, p. 136; Sachs, 2003).

We believe that the stories of ordinary classroom teachers such as Jane and Jim and teacher educators such as ourselves offer a timely reminder of the significant political choices that we all face in these difficult times. Gay (1995, p. 181) puts it well:

The commitment to creating communities of critically thinking, morally courageous, and politically engaged individuals, who work together and share power to reform society and who genuinely value diverse realities, voices, individuals, and cultures is a radical departure from conventional pedagogical emphases of individualistic competition, passive conformity, and cultural homogeneity.

We remain hopeful that the democratic principles and values encapsulated in critically reflective practice as well as the specific strategies we have identified in this article will provide us and others with some practical ways forward in the struggle to create more democratic and just forms of teacher education.

REFERENCES


