ABSTRACT
This paper examines how the Community Action Support (CAS) program, a collaboration between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) and the University of Western Sydney (UWS), has been effectively implemented at a remote high school in the Northern Territory. The program, a School-University-Community partnership, is located within the Master of Teaching (Secondary) degree at the University of Western Sydney. It requires that pre-service teachers operate both inside and outside the formal classroom environment, providing specialised individual and small group literacy and numeracy tuition to support secondary students from disadvantaged and remote Indigenous communities. This paper, based on a case study report, outlines reasons pre-service teachers gave for their participation in the program, reservations about the placement, their expectations of the program, and reflections on the overall experience of the process. Documenting the experiences of pre-service teachers engaged in this program is of particular importance to Australian education. Service learning programs like Community Action Support could be key factors in improving Indigenous literacy as well as creating a pathway to engagement in higher education and post-school employment and work.

Introduction
Indigenous Australians are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society. There are two salient factors that contribute to this: geographic isolation and poor educational achievement. A major Northern Territory survey reported that ‘students in remote Indigenous schools are, at best, three (3) years behind their urban counterparts and, at worst, seven (7) years behind’ (Northern Territory Public Accounts Committee 1996, p. 49). Further, in 2001, the Census identified that in remote locations, the number of Indigenous students who remain at school until Year 10 declined considerably (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Additionally, The Report of the Review of Indigenous Education (2004) stated that:

education systems around the nation have been unable to deliver the same levels of success for Indigenous students as they do for other students. The gap persists despite the efforts of educators in schools and on TAFE campuses. There is reason to believe that what we are currently doing is not working. Put simply, it is time for a new approach. (p. 12)

Thus, the improvement of Indigenous education has been recognised by the Australian Government as a national priority, and educational programs that focus on literacy support for students in remote communities now have major significance. Through the resources
provided by school-university-community partnerships, the status of multilingual children can be enhanced by creating a context within the school where they would have ample opportunities to demonstrate their skills and to share with their peers and teachers aspects of their culture and personal experiences.

The School-University-Community partnership activity (Community Action Support) discussed in this paper provides one way in which curriculum support has been established for Indigenous students. It illustrates how programs such as CAS can work with families and communities, create and foster a learning culture, and help Indigenous students strive towards their academic goals, among others.

The remote high school – A Profile
The remote high school is a government high school catering for students from Years 7 to 12 with 26 full-time teachers and 14 non-teaching staff (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, ACARA). It is situated in the Northern Territory and serves approximately 240 students from surrounding urban areas, as well as regional and remote communities. 75–80% of the student population is of Indigenous background (ACARA).

The school offers senior secondary students options for study in addition to standard school subjects. Students can choose, and are encouraged by the school, to study Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses offered in partnership with Charles Darwin University. The school also offers courses by correspondence in conjunction with the Northern Territory Open Education Centre, and apprenticeships provide another opportunity for students. Other valuable skills are included for study by using the structure of the Duke of Edinburgh program (ACARA).

NAPLAN results for Year 7 and Year 9, in 2008 and 2009, demonstrate that the average scores across each of the five learning areas (Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar & Punctuation, and Numeracy) are significantly lower than the average for all Australian schools but ‘close to statistically similar schools’ averages’ (ACARA).

The remote high school is also described by a rating of 712, which according to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is below the average rating of 1000. Since most schools, according to ACARA, score between 900 and 1100, this figure of 712 is significantly lower, illustrating that there may be a number of other factors that impact on learning, such as socio-economic characteristics of geographical setting and demographics, as well as the percentage of Indigenous students enrolled at the school.

The Community Action Support (CAS) Program
CAS provides mentoring to Indigenous young people from a remote high school in the Northern Territory, and it seeks to facilitate the traditional method of learning for the youth of this area. The core aim of the program is to create and communicate a positive and observable culture surrounding the significance of literacy for young people, in particular, Indigenous young people. The CAS program is a collaborative approach between the ALNF and UWS, and has the ongoing support of the Coca-Cola Australia Foundation, Papulu Apparr Kari Language Centre (NT) and staff from the local high school. A commitment to traditional Indigenous methods of learning is reflected in the Remote Community Teaching Placement in which UWS pre-service teachers mentor high school students in a variety of literacy and communication areas.

In 2010, four exemplary students from UWS were selected to be involved in the Remote Community Teaching Placement. This four-week period was made up of the traditional classroom practicum and the community engagement practicum (60 hours). During the
latter, pre-service teachers planned and conducted, usually after school, a variety of projects associated with the theme, ‘Communicating Our World’. The program engaged the participating high school students in activities ranging from creating a local newspaper and hosting drama workshops, to digital storytelling and screen printing. Video conferencing, wiki tools and other methods of communication also formed part of the process. The wide range of learning experiences ensured that participants were challenged to use a diversity of literacy skills and communication techniques.

For example a Textiles and Design pre-service teacher worked with community adults, ‘the ladies’ from the Papulu Apparr Kari Language Centre, by helping them experiment with a combination of traditional art-making practice and new art-making ideas through the construction of simple and easy to reproduce tote bags. It was intended that the bags be sold at the local art centre, thereby creating a sustainable and manageable income for the community ladies. Interesting textures and shapes were created using items from the natural environment, such as leaf, rocks, hand prints and local flora. The technique presented was a mixture of indigenous art practice and post modern art and was intended to promote indigenous art in the region.

Furthermore, two other pre-service teachers worked as a team combining their expertise in Drama and English to run forum theatre drama and creative writing workshops. Drama and creative writing, they believed, catered for a broad range of students from varying social and cultural backgrounds and could assist Indigenous youth develop both social and literacy skills. This technique of using drama and creative writing was also intended to explore personal and community issues. By participating in specifically designed workshops, Indigenous students then had the opportunity to become actively engaged in the themes and issues of the world around them. Additionally, pre-service teachers believed that since drama encourages a cooperative approach to exploring the world through enactment, the process would engage Indigenous students and promote the notion of sharing thoughts and ideas. This they believed would encourage Indigenous students to develop an ability to express emotions and ideas.

It followed then that once the Indigenous students felt safe and comfortable they could engage in creative writing activities. Creative writing then became a powerful tool to open up communication and allow change to be initiated. This, the two pre-service teachers believed, would allow the Indigenous youth to open up parts of the self that are normally kept hidden, so that they can communicate with the outside world in new and unfamiliar ways.

The English method pre-service teacher went a step further with the creative writing workshops by getting the students to produce a local newspaper. She thought it was imperative for Indigenous students to conceptualise and communicate what’s important
to them in their communities. Students were encouraged to focus on spaces and issues and the connection between the two, for example the local skate park and its importance to the community. Students devised questionnaires and surveyed, in groups/teams, local community members, community elders, friends and family. This project aimed to give students a voice, particularly in their own community. The main roles of the pre-service teacher would be to assist students in clarifying what issues/spaces they were addressing; and to help them with time management/logistics in conducting the surveys and compiling the documentation. This project integrated spoken, written and visual forms of literacy.

During the process of compiling the newspaper, students met periodically to discuss findings, check progress and suggest possible areas for further exploration. Students aimed to spend at least one afternoon per week on their project (more if they were willing) and one lesson per week on feedback/brainstorming with their peers and pre-service practicum teacher. Students had access to computers, with a checklist from the pre-service teacher to format their research findings and post them to the wiki. The exercise of compiling a newspaper for local readership and perhaps nationwide readership was also intended to increase the students’ self-efficacy and confidence.

The fourth and final pre-service teacher, with a background in HSIE (history and geography), created a collaborative unit with a group of students from the remote high school and a group of students from an urban school in south-west Sydney to explore an issue of environmental and political interest. The ‘Collaborative Classroom’ project used technology, to encourage students at both sites to use a variety of tools, including video footage, online surveys, photo diaries, wiki/blog posts and online conversations, to build communication skills. The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) provided pre-service teachers with access to Flip Video Camcorders, disposable cameras and digital audio recorders, as part of the placement. It became evident therefore from the projects outlined above that the mentoring UWS pre-service teachers provided at the remote high school was both significant and meaningful and

continued to help foster the development of literacy for the Indigenous youth of the area in a culturally acceptable and respectful way. UWS students immerse themselves in the Indigenous culture and community, experiencing significant personal and professional growth. (Brace, 2010)

The Case Study
As a pilot program, it was important for the stakeholders, UWS and ALNF, to assess the success of the program through pre- and post-practicum interviews with the pre-service teachers. For this reason a case study approach was employed in order to provide an accurate picture of the experiences of the four participants according to their personal reflections. The case study provided a reconstruction, or detailed description, of an individual’s lived experience in its unique context (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Methodology
The researcher used semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews to gather data and document the experiences of the four participants. The semi-structured focus group interviews explored questions related to the primary aims of the study. The use of semi-structured interviews also enabled the researcher to document the attitudes and experiences of pre-service teachers in dealing with remote Indigenous students in secondary school and to document the literacy and teaching strategies employed by the pre-service teachers to teach Indigenous students in remote communities. The first interview addressed the
participant’s rationale for choosing to participate in the program; to examine what they hoped to gain from this remote Indigenous placement and how they felt about completing a placement in such a community; what they thought were the pressing needs and challenges in this placement and whether they thought the experience would change what they thought teaching was about.

The second interview conducted at the conclusion of their teaching cycle focused on how and why the teaching approaches they adopted were successful; how the CAS program supports students and the school more broadly; what pre-service teachers thought had increased cultural awareness or awareness of issues affecting Indigenous education resulting from the experience; what had pre-service teachers discovered were the pressing needs and challenges in this placement and how did that differ from their expectations and to analyse the impact they thought they had on the young people at the high school, on the community and as an outsider working with Indigenous people in multiple settings. The data was coded thematically indicating the ways in which the CAS program contributed to the professional learning of the pre-service teachers in a remote school setting. Even though the sample size was small, some very significant and interesting outcomes emerged for pre-service teachers participating in the program. Findings from the interview data are presented below.

Reasons for Participation in the CAS program

Experience in a remote community

All four participants expressed a desire to be part of a broader challenge and one that would take them out of their own culture. They indicated a belief that the experience would benefit them in terms of future work opportunities. Pre-service teachers had high expectations of the placement, one of which was the insight they would gain of life in a remote Indigenous community. They were eager to learn about the issues that Indigenous students face and to gain an appreciation of their educational needs and learning styles. They also valued the opportunity to dispel cultural myths and break down stereotypes by experiencing first-hand what it is like to teach and learn in remote Indigenous communities.

The thing that I wanted to gain when I set out to do this was just an awareness about being there rather than all these things that you get from the media, from textbooks, from journal articles … like I’ve never been in a position to experience it so I hope to gain like a knowledge and awareness of … Indigenous issues within the remote community and hopefully become an agent for change in some way.

I hope to gain experience … not just in teaching but in terms of life as well just encountering different kinds of people that I haven’t encountered for some time. I think, yeah, just a broader horizon of the world and I also think that the skills that I encounter and pick up, teaching indigenous kids in that insular environment can then be translated to other kinds of kids anywhere.

Several pre-service teachers felt that they would like to work in a similar context in the future and were optimistic that the CAS program would provide them with invaluable skills and experience.

So hopefully this will be an opportunity to open doors – if that happens fantastic, if it doesn’t well I’ve got experience so you know I can then move on.

Yeah, I’m also expecting to grow in my pedagogy, pastoral and communication skills across the board but particularly in understanding Australian Indigenous communities and life.
Reservations about the placement

Student Engagement

Some of the pre-service teachers communicated concerns about connecting effectively with the Indigenous students and local community. They felt apprehensive as to whether the techniques and strategies learned at university would translate to this Northern Territory context.

I just really want the students to be able to engage with me and trust me and I just really want to do a good job when I’m there.

I’m a little bit worried about whether … you know about engaging students in the placement in the school and in the community.

I’m concerned about my ability to engage the students … I’m going up there with really big ideas but I’ve got no idea whether I’ll walk into the classroom and they’ll actually work … I have no idea whether that’s going to work because I don’t know the community, I don’t know the students.

The pre-service teachers were eager to make their placement worthwhile for themselves and the students, and were concerned that students would see them as outsiders. It was perceived that if this were the case it would be more difficult to engage Indigenous students in the classroom activities. It was important therefore to immerse themselves in the culture, foster greater community participation in the program, and create relationships of trust and partnership. Calma (2008) suggests that it is only when this understanding of another culture takes place that curriculum can adequately reflect that culture. It is then that the Indigenous community can feel that the education system is committed to their on-going educational needs.

Access to Resources

Pre-service teacher participants expressed reservations about the availability and accessibility of resources. The perception was that schools, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, were poorly funded and therefore lacked common resources.

I feel prepared but I feel like I need to be more prepared … we’re just a bit nervous about making sure we’ve got all the resources that we need before we go.

… it may be hard to access resources … there won’t be lots of libraries around for example so I’ve purchased a net book so I can access the internet and that sort of thing.

Another challenge identified was the differences between the New South Wales syllabus and the Northern Territory Syllabus groupings. For example, one pre-service teacher found that whereas TAS in New South Wales has a separate syllabus, in the Northern Territory, it forms part of a broader Art syllabus. Another pre-service teacher identified a similar anomaly with History.

I’ll be teaching TAS when I’m there but because there isn’t technically a TAS area I’ll be doing it kind of under the Art umbrella.

I’m also finding it hard to interpret the Northern Territory syllabus with reference to society and culture/history here … it’s not defined the way it is here, there’s no history, geography etc, it’s just all one subject so it’s much, much broader so that’s the main thing I’m concerned about.
Expectations of the program

Community Engagement
The nature of the CAS program was such that engagement with the Indigenous community was an integral part of the experience, and was a necessary component of the UWS pre-service teachers’ community engagement practicum. This aspect meant that pre-service teachers could focus on students by using a much more ‘hands on’ approach. Engaging with the community means gaining their trust, and pre-service teachers were aware that if this did not occur then their projects would not have the desired effect. Aside from respect for cultural values, students felt that their enthusiasm in presenting these projects would elicit a positive response from the community members.

I’m expecting kids to be really, really hands on and practical in their learning so …more practical based rather than theory based.

I think that will take a lot of time to build a relationship of trust with the ladies in the community because coming as an outsider in a way …getting a friendship with the ladies to get them to do what I’m trying to get them to do.

Reflections on the CAS Experience

Challenging
Pre-service teachers discussed the negative feeling amongst community members towards the education system, describing a loss of faith directly linked to the transient nature of teaching staff and the subsequent failure to complete educational programs. This presented them with a challenge, in particular with regard to establishing rapport and trust towards school and education.

… we heard stories of people who had come in, promised all this stuff and then just shot through and not delivered. So that obviously is only reinforcing the existing negative associations people have with authority and teachers.

And I also became highly aware of the highly transient nature of teachers in remote communities is serving to reinforce barriers between indigenous and non-indigenous communities, because they are just getting this message that people – that no one really cares enough to stay.

While we can’t all stay forever I think something we all tried to do was to be open and honest about our intentions and say we are only here for one month.

Developing Rapport
UWS pre-service teachers observed a significant contrast based on their previous practicum experience between the students in this remote Indigenous community and those from urban New South Wales schools. They commented on their different philosophy on life and were grateful for the opportunity to have witnessed this in action. By the end of the CAS program, the school students were responding positively to the teaching and were engaging with their pre-service teachers in the classroom setting as well as in the community setting. This reflected one of the main characteristics of the program, which sought to engage with the entire community. It also reinforced the essence of traditional Indigenous methods of learning, which are based on mentoring and reciprocal learning. This style of collaborative learning is only successful with the establishment of rapport between teachers and students, and the CAS pre-service teachers saw evidence of this when the students began to open up and participate in activities enthusiastically.
I really loved working with the kids, and not just the Indigenous ones, but just all of them in general, they were lovely and the way they approach life is so different to the kids here. The funny thing is, they are still teenagers or whatever, but just the philosophy and just the way they just go about things is just different.

... as we went along the students were much more confident in going up to people in the street and interviewing them and writing about them, and things like that, so yeah, probably confidence and being comfortable.

I had them coming in at lunch and recess ... and obviously showed that they cared about what they were doing in class ... they were enjoying and they wanted to spend extra time.

Students also seemed more willing to attend class. I just overheard a lot of the other teachers talking about certain students that they had never seen [but] who would be at my class every day.

These reflections are supported by current research, which suggests that Indigenous students respond better when teachers are actively engaged and are more culturally aware. In fact, Indigenous schools with high attendance levels generally attribute their success to culturally sensitive teachers who are able to develop a rapport with both students and the community as a whole (McDonald, 2004). This is supported by Groome (2002), suggesting that educators must be ‘open to hear Indigenous voices’ in order to develop education programs that are both culturally appropriate and relevant (p. 186).

Collaboration and Commitment to the Program

Further, the UWS participants demonstrated their commitment and enthusiasm for the CAS program, and were eager to create the best possible experience for students and the community. A good example of this was when the pre-service teacher used her food budget given by the ALNF for extra resources for the adults and young people she worked with.

I ended up spending because I don’t eat that much food, I ended up spending all of that money on resources. So I bought fabric and paint and all that kind of thing with that money.

I took a photo of them all ... and they wouldn’t smile but you could tell that they actually ... they wanted to go off and show people what they made.

Learning Challenges

Through his review of Indigenous student education outcomes Masters (2009) found that Indigenous students in remote communities perform in the bottom 5 to 10 per cent of all students nationally. Such facts made it difficult to create a positive learning environment and they highlighted the reality and systemic nature of literacy problems in this remote community. Pre-service teachers were surprised to find that low literacy was not confined to a portion of the student population, but rather was a reflection of the community as a whole.

I knew that there was low literacy, but in terms of teaching English I had no idea that all the students were that low in literacy.

The issue of literacy isn’t in just the high school or primary school, it is throughout the whole town, and so if your parents or grandparents or whoever is looking after you can’t read, how then can they help you do your homework? Or how can they sit with you and read a story? They can’t do it, so you can’t ... develop your abilities outside of school because no one can do it.

One of the things that I found really surprising which I didn’t expect was the inability of the students to learn. And I think that comes from such a broken experience in primary school where they just don’t understand how to translate this piece of information that we’ve just gone
through seconds ago. It was interesting even and exciting to work around that problem but I was surprised that it was every child. And it wasn’t laziness.

In particular pre-service teachers found that students responded well when lessons were conducted in an informal and unstructured style, based on student collaboration, observations and imitations.

I made this little slide show of my family because we were getting into the family writing ... and they wanted to watch it five times.

Making a difference
Despite many of the confronting elements of the CAS placement, the pre-service teachers were optimistic and felt they had contributed to a new period of change. They were confident they had had a positive impact on students. All the pre-service teachers participating in the program expressed a desire to teach and hoped that they would be able to make an impact on students in the future. The notion that change is possible was also reflected in their enthusiasm to begin teaching.

I stopped taking things like a safe home life, space to sleep, access to a computer, desk, etc. for granted. Like some students were coming in and they literally hadn’t slept all night because there were so many people in the house that they couldn’t find a place to sleep, or a quiet space.

I think it’s kind of an exciting time, like it is a time now that things change.

I feel ready to teach.

I’ve walked out feeling I am ready to be a teacher.

Some of the pre-service teachers felt the experience had changed them as a person and even expressed a desire to go back to the remote high school community or to work in similar communities in the future. In fact, one pre-service teacher received an offer of employment at the school for 2011 and is currently on the school staff. Pre-service teachers reported that they had learned a great deal from their experience in the CAS program. They also believed that the CAS program helped them develop an understanding that teaching must be tailored to students in order for it to be meaningful. Indigenous students cannot be seen as a homogenous group and any program for students in remote Indigenous communities requires collaboration, dedication and flexibility.

I think the main thing that it is ... is that you can’t just look at a student and tick them off as indigenous [then] look at a list of indigenous learning styles and go this is what I’m going to do.

In addition, the CAS participants all agreed that this experience was invaluable and shaped future directions for their teaching. They described the remote high school placement as a wonderful opportunity and a highlight of their year at university.

It was fantastic working with them. Best thing I’ve ever done.

... the best thing that I’ve done in my entire life.

I loved it, absolutely loved it, it was a really amazing time, I couldn’t even describe just how big an impact it has been ...

... I wish I was still there.

I am keen to go back there; I’ve put in an application so here’s hoping that’s what happens.
Conclusion
The Community Action Support program orchestrated the socialisation of the pre-service teachers into the remote school and community. This allowed the pre-service teachers an opportunity to work with experienced classroom teachers from the high school which then allowed them to be self-reflective about their practice. It provided pre-service teachers with a renewed desire to teach and to enact positive change. Having first-hand experience of the difficulties and challenges faced by students in remote Indigenous communities meant that pre-service teachers became more concerned about culturally inclusive teaching for the future. This remote teaching experience significantly improved the pre-service teachers’ perception of teaching and energised their desire to become full time teachers.

References