

Where in the world is Kolkata? Can international school placements make a difference to intercultural awareness?

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Abstract

In an increasingly globalised society, teachers must be prepared to work in multicultural classrooms with intercultural sensitivity. They also need to provide their students with multicultural understanding and therefore experience in another culture could be important. The understanding gained could contribute to the sustainability of social cohesiveness, firstly in a teacher's own classroom, then, conceivably, nationally. In this paper the author addresses the impact of a four week international placement in Kolkata, India, on the teaching philosophy and strategies of fourteen initial teacher education students. The pre-service teachers were asked to complete four surveys; before, during and after their placement and a last survey after another teaching placement some six months after their Indian experience. There were also assessment requirements where students had to reflect initially on what might lie ahead and later discuss aspects of what they might share and what they had learned whilst on placement by referring to 'critical incidents'. The results of the study demonstrate that the students were certainly out of their comfort zone, but that valuable learning occurred.

Keywords: International placements, cultural awareness, practicum, teacher education

1. Introduction

The term 'global village' (attributed to McLuhan, 1962, 1964) has entered into common parlance and, in education, has taken on new meaning as education boundaries have extended beyond the traditional classroom to encompass world-wide 'virtual' classrooms. The recent advent of massive open online courses (MOOCs), which span both international borders and time zones, is testament to this change in focus. These extended boundaries create an educational imperative in terms of understanding the multicultural differences that will exist within any global cohort. On a micro scale, in Australia, multiculturalism also exists within many traditional classrooms with increasing numbers of non-Anglo Australian, non-English speaking background students engaging in educational settings from early childhood to tertiary education.

Given this heterogeneous educational milieu in Australian schools, it is critical that teachers are prepared to understand the different backgrounds and to meet the individual needs of their diverse student cohorts. This requirement is recognised in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011) within a number of the standards and, most particularly, Standard 1.3 which states that teachers must be able to "demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds" (AITSL, 2011, p. 8). Working in these classrooms requires what has been described as 'cultural competency' (Fitzgerald, 2000), a competency that:

is about developing the ability to identify and challenge one's cultural assumptions, one's values and beliefs. It is about developing ... the ability to see the world through another's eyes or, at the very least, to recognize that others may view the world through different cultural lenses (Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 184).

However, methods as to how this is translated into pedagogical practice are still debated. The argument developed in this paper is that a major form of preparation occurs through professional experience (or practicum) placements.

Professional experience is well-documented as being a pivotal component of initial teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman, 2010; Hastings & Page, 2006; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005) and "the implicit value of this component of teacher education is not contested" (Taffe & Knipe, 2005, p. 423). Indeed, in Victoria, Australia, a government inquiry into teacher preparation stated that:

practicum is the most effective means of preparing pre-service teachers to teach the curriculum ..., to prepare them for assessment, reporting and administrative responsibilities, and for the human relations dimensions required for developing relationships with students, colleagues and parents (Parliament of Victoria, 2005, p. 135).

The importance of this aspect of all teacher education programs is recognised in Australia with accreditation of initial teacher education courses requiring a specified number of placement days. A pre-service teacher might achieve outstanding results in all theory units, but, without satisfactory completion of the requisite number of professional experience days, s/he cannot graduate as a teacher.

The author contends that, given the key role of professional experience placements, an international placement can be instrumental in enhancing awareness of and developing strategies to encompass multiculturalism in classrooms. It is acknowledged that this argument is not new. In 1987, Wilson posited that “cross-cultural experiential learning should be a component of every teacher education program” (p. 519). However, the changes in the educational milieu described earlier make this approach more important than ever. The understandings gained through such international experiential learning could contribute to the sustainability of social cohesiveness, firstly in a teacher’s own classroom, then, conceivably, nationally.

In this paper, the author describes a research study based on a four week school placement situated in Kolkata, India. The background to international placements at the University of New England (UNE) in New South Wales, Australia, is briefly explained, followed by an outline of the research methods. There is then a discussion of the findings in terms of the impact of this placement on the teaching philosophy and strategies of the participating pre-service teachers. The author concludes the paper with a discussion of the importance of multicultural experiences for teacher formation.

2. Background: International Placements and the UNE Context

International professional experience placements began at UNE in 1998 in Wuxi, China with the aim of broadening the international perspective of teacher education programs. More specifically, learning outcomes for the placement included that the participants would be able to:

- demonstrate an appropriate understanding of inter-cultural issues relevant to education contexts;
- communicate with teachers, other school and university personnel, students and community members associated with the placement school in an effective, culturally sensitive and professional manner;
- demonstrate appropriate cultural awareness and the capacity to develop and implement curriculum and pedagogy that is responsive and sensitive to educational contexts within an international experience.

Pre-service teachers were provided with this international opportunity as an elective unit in their initial teacher education program. Originally it was offered only to the on-campus cohort of primary teacher education students, but gradually it was also offered as a core placement to off-campus students in both primary and secondary teacher education programs. Participants in the international placement unit were responsible for funding the travel component of this opportunity themselves. The host schools provided accommodation and meals without cost. The last of these placements in China occurred in 2007. It had become increasingly difficult to find schools to accommodate the pre-service teachers and, in 2008, the bird ‘flu pandemic saw the cancellation of any international placement for that year.

In 2009 an invitation was extended to UNE from an international school, in Kolkata, India, to take a group of pre-service teachers to that school for a four week professional experience placement. The first reaction of many people was who, what or where is Kolkata? The second reaction was that here was a possible new partnership: a school asking us to take students and a university looking for another location for international placements after links

with China had dwindled. Between May and November 2009 a contract was negotiated and then signed between the school and university, pre-service teachers were alerted to the new opportunity, enrolment of fourteen participants occurred and briefing sessions, based on many emails to and from Kolkata, were held. The pre-service teachers were also split into pairs as the school that they were going to, under the leadership of an Australian principal who was hoping for pedagogical innovation, was keen for them to teach in pairs in the classrooms. The group left for Kolkata in mid-November, 2009, accompanied by one lecturer (the author).

3. The Study

3.1. Purpose

While there had been international placements at UNE for 10 years, there had only been informal evaluations of these placements with little research into the impact on the pre-service teachers and their teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices, particularly after the placement had concluded. With this in mind, the aim of this research project was twofold. Firstly, to explore the immediate benefits and challenges of engaging in an international professional experience placement on these aspects. The second aim was to examine the participants' beliefs about any longer term impacts after another placement, in Australia, at least six months later.

3.2. Cultural Awareness via the Third Space

In 1994, Bhaba described the concept of the third space where cultural differences are experienced through one set of assumptions and beliefs being set against another causing "moments of panic" as a result of a "contingent, borderline experience" (p.207) where dissonance comes to the fore. This research project uses the third space conceptual framework to underpin the analysis of the surveys and reflective writing pieces described in the next section.

3.3. Methods

In order to explore the benefits and challenges of engaging in an international professional experience placement a variety of methods were used including surveys, online forums and reflective writing. As the lecturer accompanying the pre-service teachers was also responsible for marking the reflective writing pieces, which were assessment tasks, ethics approval was gained for analysis after results were released. All pre-service teachers were given a pseudonym by another member of staff and the pseudonym/actual name correlation was not released to the author until after results had been finalised.

The first of four surveys was administered prior to going overseas and aimed to establish the pre-service teachers' attitudes to the placement, as well as what they perceived might be the benefits of the placement for their teaching. The second survey occurred mid-way through the placement and sought to ascertain any changes in attitude by the pre-service teachers. The third survey was then completed after the pre-service teachers returned to Australia and sought information about how they believed that they had been affected by the experience and whether their teaching had been or would be modified in any way. The final survey occurred after another Australian teaching experience (a minimum of six months after the international placement) and aimed to discover whether there had been any lasting changes in teaching practice. Some analysis of the survey data was conducted through SurveyMonkey, the program used for the surveys, and the rest of the analysis was done using Wordle, Leximancer and manual coding. Wordle is an online software package that produces 'word clouds' from input text, giving greater prominence to more frequently used words (see

<http://www.wordle.net/>). Leximancer is a text analysis software package that clusters text into concepts (see <https://www.leximancer.com/>).

Data was also collected from pre-service teacher postings into a pre-placement forum and by analysing their three reflective pieces of writing, again one before leaving, one mid-way through the placement, and one at the end. These reflective writing pieces were linked to what have been described as ‘critical incidents’:

... distinct occurrences or events which involve two or more people; they are neither inherently negative nor positive, they are merely distinct occurrences or events which require some attention, action or explanation; they are situations for which there is a need to attach meaning (Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 190).

The pre-service teachers were asked to write about their expectations of the placement for their first reflective writing piece and the second asked them to comment on some of the challenges. In terms of the research project, the third reflective writing piece was the most important. This asked students to:

analyse how you have developed as a teacher, both in terms of teaching ability and also in terms of cultural sensitivity. Identify any changes in your personal and professional understandings that arise through this analysis.

3.4. The Participants

A group of fourteen pre-service teachers had enrolled in the international placement unit and they agreed to take part in the research project, thereby giving consent to use not only the specific research surveys data, but also to use their forum postings and assessment tasks. All of the participants were primary pre-service teachers and only one of these was not studying in face-to-face mode. There were three males and eleven females and only the female off-campus pre-service teacher and one female on-campus pre-service teacher had not entered the teacher education program straight from school, but rather had entered through mature-age entry. All participants had completed their first three core placements, thus having some teaching experience.

In preparing the pre-service teachers for their placement through regular meetings to discuss expectations and to answer concerns it was discovered that of the fifteen people heading to Kolkata (including the author) only one had ever been to India. Of more significance, two pre-service teachers had never left the northern areas of New South Wales or been on a plane before and one other had never been further than Sydney (the New South Wales state capital), a distance of 600 kilometres from the university. Another four pre-service teachers had never been outside Australia. This meant, that 50% of the participants had had only limited exposure to international cultures and had certainly not been immersed in such a culture as would occur during the placement.

4. Discussion

Prior to leaving Australia, the participants were asked in the initial survey about their emotions regarding the placement. Their feelings are evident in Figure 1, a Wordle created from the list of emotions provided by the pre-service teachers.

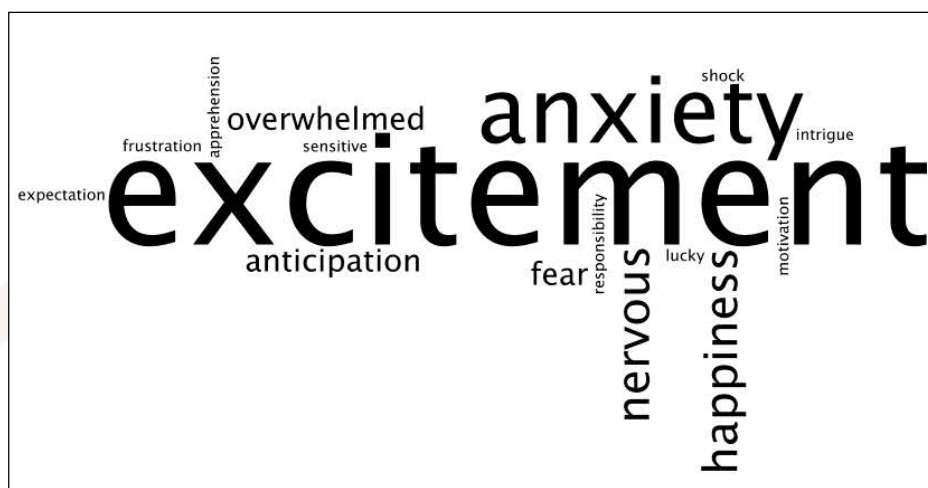


Figure 1: Pre-International Placement Emotions

As might be expected, the pre-service teachers were excited with a strong element of anxiety as well. One participant expressed the excitement, stating:

I am not only embarking on the idea of travelling overseas but I am also doing it in using my passion to teach children. Learning about new ways of living and learning will be a huge part in developing the teacher I will become (Kangaroo paw).

Another participant also demonstrated her excitement, but added the reason for her anxiety:

To be able to go overseas to a completely foreign place will push me not only as a future teacher but also as a person. I am so excited, but scared. ... This trip will be a complete culture shock for me as I have led a very sheltered life and to be perfectly honest I hope I don't give out racist vibes or offend people when we're over there (Jacaranda).

This participant also demonstrated that she had already started to consider the ways in which she might need to be sensitive to another culture and to consider her words and actions more carefully than perhaps she was used to. This awareness was communicated by many of the participants. One of the other participants, who had not been out of Australia, also referred to this awareness, but did so in words that demonstrated her anxiety was overwhelming her excitement;

This being my first time leaving the country there are many reasons for my anxiety. I am generally a very friendly and out there kind of girl and I seem to have been born with a case of foot in mouth so I am afraid that certain things I do and say might cause offence to some or may get me in trouble in some way or another (Acacia).

It is interesting to note that even before experiencing the placement in an international setting, some of the students were already beginning to develop awareness of what immigrants to Australia might feel and how this might affect teaching these children in their classrooms in the future. Bougainvillea, one of the male participants, wrote in his first reflective piece:

An experience like this gives me an insight into how a student feels when they come to Australia and know nothing about the customs, cultures and religions of the area. It would be incredibly hard to fit into a new place and even more so if you don't understand the language spoken around you. As a professional I feel that going on this practicum I will grow in confidence and my pedagogy will benefit from this markedly.

There is evidence here that international placements can have an effect on teaching philosophy even before the placement itself begins.

By mid-way in the placement the pre-service teachers were beginning to feel some strain as reflected in their emotions:



Figure 2: During International Placement Emotions

By this stage, the participants were feeling the strain of working from 8.00am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday and presenting in-service sessions to their supervising teachers and other school staff on Saturday mornings. They also found living in dormitories, in close contact with each other constantly, rather fatiguing. They were also finding themselves frustrated on a range of levels as individuals met with challenges in communication.

Several participants made survey comments indicating that they were not fully prepared for the difference in teaching approaches and also indicating that they had entered the placement feeling that they would show the teachers another method of teaching that would be willingly embraced. This was most clearly shown by Melaleuca who, in response to what was felt to be a major problem, stated that it was "getting the Indian teachers to accept us into their classrooms and take on board what we were saying and implementing". This may have developed from the principal's request to use collaborative learning in the classrooms, but also reflected their own views of the superiority of Australian education. Boronia commented that "I realise how lucky I am to be one day teaching in a country which values (this)." Some of the participants could certainly be described as demonstrating a 'colonist' approach in the early days of their placement.

While it appeared from survey responses that the pre-service teachers were not learning from their supervising teachers other than being sure they would not teach in the same way, their

reflective writing presented a different view. Waratah, in particular, made a more balanced comment, remarking that:

Teaching in a classroom with a teacher from another culture allowed me to learn so much more. The differences in the way we taught allowed me to gain a better understanding and a clearer idea of the strengths and weaknesses in my own teaching style.

The survey responses, done in free time between lessons, perhaps are knee-jerk style responses in the busyness of the day while the reflective writing, completed over time, presented a more considered approach to their experiences.

While the earlier surveys and first reflective pieces provided evidence that the participants were gaining new awareness from their experiences of the placement, the final reflective task and the last two surveys were more indicative of the impact of the placement. In both the third and fourth survey, the pre-service teachers were asked to rate the impact of the experience on their teaching philosophy and strategies. Immediately after the placement, nine participants responded to the survey. The final survey was completed more than six months after the pre-service teachers returned to Australia and after they had completed another placement. Most of these placements were completed in regional and rural New South Wales. Twelve of the fourteen participants responded to this final survey. The responses to these two surveys are shown comparatively in Figures 3 and 4.

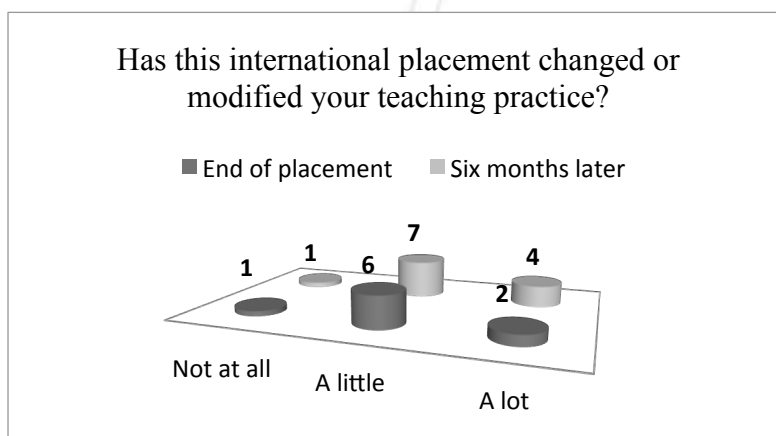


Figure 3: Survey 3 – Impact on Teaching Philosophy

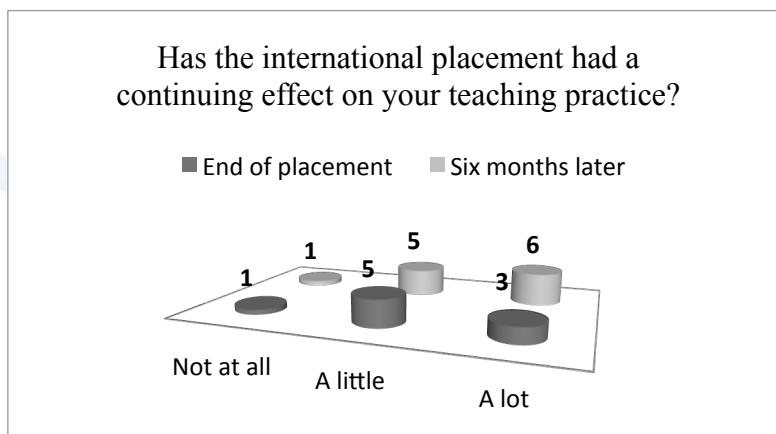


Figure 4: Survey 3 – Impact on Teaching Practice

Generally the pre-service teachers reported experiencing some impact from the experience. Interestingly, in survey 3, the 'not at all' response came from the older, off-campus student who was well-travelled and who also was most critical in her reflections about the other participants. Many of the other participants recognised the impact more positively and made comments such as:

Learning to adapt and to become more culturally sensitive. Also learning how to cater for the needs of the culturally diverse students. Also learning not to place assumptions on students because of their religious beliefs or cultural values and learning not to stereotype them (Banksia),

and

Working with students from different cultural backgrounds, learning of these and being able to incorporate these into my teaching practices and my own personal knowledge and personal philosophy (Callistemon).

In the survey 4 results, an interesting change in response that should be mentioned is that the participant who had rated both questions as 'not at all' in survey 3 did not respond to survey 4 and the 'not at all' responses in survey 4 (one in each question) came from two different participants, both of whom had responded 'a little' in survey 3.

Teasing out the responses shown in the surveys was difficult as many of the respondents did not avail themselves of the questions requesting elucidation of the rating. However, there were a range of comments which cast light on how the international experience has had an impact. Callistemon stated immediately after the placement that:

This practicum has definitely changed my teaching philosophies. I feel that from this experience I have become more confident and it has strengthened my core beliefs and values in teaching as a profession. I definitely do believe that every child has a right to learn and, by saying that, we as teachers need to facilitate this learning and cater to the best for these children's individual needs. From the classrooms in India I have learnt that even though children differ in background, contexts and cultural and religious values, children are still children and have the right to learn individually. This professional experience may not have changed my philosophy radically, but rather built upon and strengthened it.

She went on to state after another placement that "now I have a deeper understanding of how hard it is for students to fit into a culture that is not the same as the culture they come from". This latter sentiment was echoed by Lillypilly in her recognition that:

I have now got more empathy towards students who are a minority within a classroom: similar to what it was like for myself in India.

Lillypilly was developing cultural competency, "the ability to see the world through another's eyes" (Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 184).

There were also many comments about teaching practice and the responses tended to show that these were perhaps more impacted than teaching philosophies. Indicative participant comments were:

I am more aware of the need to plan and provide for the diversity of my classroom (Kangaroo paw);

and

Because the teaching practices are so different from the way we are taught to teach in Australia it makes you stop and reflect on 'why' we do things the way we do, and how this impacts on the students and their learning. It also gets you to look at 'how' the students are learning and how much they enjoy their schooling in Australia compared with India, which in turn influences their learning outcomes (Boronia).

While Boronia commented on teaching practice having been influenced by the placement it is interesting to note that there is still an element of 'Australian is better than Indian' in the comment.

The qualitative comments from the surveys were also supported by the more deeply reflective comments in the writing pieces submitted for assessment. Many of the pre-service teachers demonstrated that they had been impacted by their experience, some on a deep level. One of the most telling pieces of writing came from Acacia, who wrote:

India has had a huge impact on me as a whole: my thoughts, beliefs and priorities have definitely been shaped by the wonderful people I had the pleasure of meeting and spending time with whilst in India. ... These people have helped me to understand and adapt to change and to never judge something or someone until you have tried to put yourself in their shoes and understand the reasons behind their actions. ... During my short stay I believe my cultural sensitivity has been changed and formed, and that these people are responsible for my differing views. I am ashamed to say that before venturing on this journey I was quite a racist person towards specific cultural groups. ... As a primary teacher, I now see the importance of teaching values education and concepts such as acceptance and empathy.

5. Conclusion

International pre-service teacher placements are not uncommon. However, they are also expensive and, in Australia, will become more limited as accreditation requirements force more days of placement in Australian schools rather than other settings (only 10% can now be in a non-Australian setting). This project demonstrated that there are positive effects on the philosophy and pedagogical practices of participating pre-service teachers, effects that are profound for some. It is unfortunate that it has not been possible to follow-up these participants more recently, after they have taught in schools for two or more years. Given the opportunity, the author would build this into a future, more longitudinal project. Other studies (Willard-Holt, 2001; Maynes, Allison & Julien-Schultz, 2012) have shown that international placements can have continuing impact.

As multiculturalism continues to rise in Australia, it is clear that the teachers of the future need to be prepared to teach in culturally sensitive ways as well as have the necessary skills to teach cultural awareness to the children in their classrooms. Through the experience of being in the third space, these sensitivities and skills can be fostered. Teacher educators now need to explore how to build this experience more cohesively into their courses and governments to consider funding such experiences.

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