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Preparing the global teacher

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ABSTRACT

There is increased interest by international students to undertake preservice teacher education courses in Australia. The two-year Master of Teaching (Middle and Secondary) has a strand within the main program that provides additional support for international students wanting to gain a teaching qualification. However, how effective is this strand and other accompanying support strategies in helping international students face the numerous challenges confronting them in their professional experience placements? This study examines feedback from an online survey where a number of opened ended and scaled questions provide an opportunity for international students to reflect on the value of their current program in equipping them for successful entry into the profession. Six interviews, three preservice teachers and three university mentors, were conducted to further tease out some of the issues. While the findings are limited, this paper explores the success of implemented strategies while also highlighting the challenges faced by many teacher education institutions in producing quality teachers who can enhance the international perspective in our multicultural classrooms.

Keywords: international students, professional experience placements, language barriers, cultural adaptations

Introduction

International education has become increasingly popular and many students are deciding to undertake their tertiary studies in Australia bringing increased cultural diversity into university courses. Non-native English speakers from overseas face multiple challenges in “adapting to a foreign culture, understanding the expectations of their role and adjusting to language, communication and cultural differences” (Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009, p79). Preservice teachers face additional pressures as they work in Australian classrooms which are often far removed from their own school experiences. Despite these challenges, international preservice teachers can bring additional breadth and depth to our multicultural classrooms. Increasing the number of international teachers has the potential to bring different cultural perspectives and experiences into the classroom, thus enhancing the students’ understanding of the role they play as global citizens.

This paper draws on feedback from an online survey where international preservice teachers are asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their teacher education program in equipping them for successful entry into the teaching profession. Feedback from interviews with 3 preservice teachers and 3 university mentors provides further insight into the responses from the survey. This paper explores the success of the current program and identifies areas that require further consideration for successful entry into the teaching profession.

The literature

International preservice teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds face huge challenges in meeting the requirements of a beginning teacher and demonstrating their readiness for the teaching profession. These are manifested particularly in their professional experience placements. Students have a defined time, dictated by visa regulations, in which to address language barriers, cultural differences and the “multiple layers of institutional relationships” (Ishihara, 2005, p154). Some international preservice teachers simply require more time to demonstrate their effectiveness as a teacher.

Although international preservice teachers may have strong backgrounds in certain learning areas based on their previous degrees, they can often struggle to explain the most fundamental concepts because they have not studied these subjects in English. They are also expected to teach in settings very different from their own school experiences and with limited information for mentor teachers on how to support them (Campbell, O’Gorman, Tangan, Spooner-Lane & Alford, 2008). These various challenges act as barriers to successful completion where preservice teachers can feel disconnected from their school experience leaving them “feeling vulnerable, isolated, confused and threatened” (Campbell et.al., 2008). Conflict may be evident where the preservice teachers’ behaviour and values of their own culture are not compatible with the behavioural expectations and values of the host culture (Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009).

International preservice teachers are frequently taken aback when entering Australian classrooms as there may be a mismatch between what they perceive as the role of a teacher and the realities of what occurs in the classroom (Spooner-Lane et.al, 2009). They also struggle with the role that the mentor plays in their placement. Even in their final placement they believe that their mentor should be providing them with resources and basically giving them the lesson and guiding them through it, right up until the last week of their placement. It is often very difficult to move them to the next step where they show initiative and take responsibility for their own learning and for that of their students.

Possibly the greatest challenge for international preservice teachers is to be competent users of the English language (Geer, 2008; Ishihara, 2005). They actually have to learn four forms of the English language during their studies. They require good functional language so that they can readily communicate in any situation and more easily build relationships. They must acquire the academic language that will allow them to express themselves in essays and discussions. They also need to learn the professional language for their areas of teaching expertise, which means knowing the equivalent English terms. An example of confusion in mathematics is that in India the term ‘into’ means multiply rather than divide (3 into 12 equals 4 while in India the answer is 36) – this can lead to uncertainty and misunderstanding. The fourth language is that of the classroom and the ‘lingo’ that students use to express themselves. Gaining a grasp of classroom language is possibly one of the more difficult challenges. There are also subtleties in our language that are not readily picked up. A mentor teacher might say “*it would be a good idea if you included this in your lesson*” which in actual fact means you should include this in your lesson; you are not being given a choice.

Of further importance to preservice teacher success is the ability to adjust to the academic context. There is a prevailing discourse around the notion of a ‘cultural deficit’, particularly of international Asian students, that identifies typical learning processes such as rote, reproductive and surface learners which are approaches arising out of their own social, political and educational contexts but do not match the approach practised in Australian universities (Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos, 1999). They may also be unfamiliar with some of the assessment types such as reflective journals or literature reviews in cultures that rely on exams and tests as indicators of achievement. Biggs (1993) suggested that rote learning emanating from the transition model led to a surface approach to learning while Chalmers and Volet (1997) have concluded that the focus on recall could be considered as a way of achieving greater and deeper understanding.

International preservice teachers may also struggle with unfamiliar teaching styles. There may also be differences in the amount of support and guidance provided by staff as “students may be expecting teaching staff to read draft assignments before submission or to direct them to the exact text which will supply ‘the answer’” (Rhoden & Boin, 2005). Difficulties with English can also impact on their ability

to keep up with the readings and related activities. Despite such challenges having students from different cultural backgrounds can bring diversity of norms and values, thus enriching the learning experience for all (Beaver & Tuck, 1999).

The Study

This study examined the effectiveness of the Master of Teaching (Middle and Secondary) program in preparing international preservice teachers for their professional experience placements. Currently there are 42 international preservice teachers, predominantly from China and India, undertaking their final placement. These students were invited to complete an online survey on their preparedness to be successful in their final placement. Eighteen students (14 females and 4 males) responded. When obtaining feedback from written questions non native English speakers may misunderstand what is being asked. However the responses suggest that the meaning of the questions were generally understood and therefore the results can be considered as valid. In addition three preservice teachers were interviewed about their ability to demonstrate beginning teacher standards. This helped to confirm their understanding and interpretation of the survey questions. Three university mentors were also asked about their perceptions of readiness of international preservice teacher for the profession.

Since 2009 we have introduced a quota on the number of international students entering the program because of difficulties experienced in finding quality placements. Teachers who are currently under extreme pressure (NAPLAN testing, National Curriculum and new SACE) are especially reluctant to mentor international preservice teachers who require considerable more support. This year there will only be a midyear intake which will give international students more time to acculturate and improve their language confidence before commencing their first placement nine months later. In addition, as English language competency is acknowledged as one of their biggest challenges the program has increased its IELTS (International English Language Testing System) requirement this year from 6.5 to 7.0 with a minimum of 6.5 across all subscores (reading, writing, listening, speaking). Without good communication skills cultural adaptation becomes increasingly difficult.

Findings and Discussion

In the online survey international preservice teachers were asked to identify the courses that best prepared them for their placement as well as those that were least effective. Not surprisingly they identified their professional experience courses, Educational Psychology and Introduction to Australian Education, one of the international strand courses, as the most beneficial courses. Courses considered least beneficial had a lot of reading and less direct application. International students over the duration of the program have regularly indicated their difficulties in keeping up with the readings because of the time it takes. Also they were unfamiliar with writing literature reviews or reflective journal entries which were often components of such courses.

The following table (Table 1) indicates the aspects of teaching they felt least prepared for before commencing their final placement. This was presented as an open ended question.

Table 1: *Concerns about teaching in schools*

Areas of concern	Incidences
Classroom/Behaviour management	5
English language	5
Content knowledge of specialisations	7
Teaching strategies	1
Confidence	1

Professional relationships	1
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The outcomes are not surprising as frequently international preservice teachers expressed their concern that the students were often not well behaved and showed little interest in learning, which many could not understand as they considered education to be of utmost importance in their lives and had spent most of their lives studying for success. Explanations of terminology were a problem because of their limited English.

The biggest challenge in their university studies was a good knowledge of the English language (Table 2). This also compounded their attempts to adjust to the culture, build relationships and meet assessment criteria. Also their previous tertiary and school experiences did not prepare them for the cultural adaptations and academic norms that they experience in their tutorials, and in understanding the vastly different school contexts.

Table 2: *Challenges in their studies*

Greatest challenges	Incidences
English language	14
Cultural adaptation	8
Learning/teaching styles	8
Relationships/socialisation	6
Assessment types	5
School context	4
Adjustment to food	1
Campus travel	2

In teacher education they are expected to learn through inquiry and work collaboratively, leading to a high level of interactivity in their courses which they find both daunting and threatening (Ling, Burman, Cooper & Ling, 2006). Students from Asian cultures are often reluctant to express their feelings, share their opinions or ask questions of authority figures (Lin & Yi, 1997). Exposures to the unfamiliar can lead to anxiety, loneliness and confusion.

When asked what they considered as their strengths as future teachers, many of the preservice teachers spoke about their caring nature and passion and enthusiasm to learn. However they did not identify the importance of building professional relationships with students, colleagues and the school community. Many students from non western cultures have only experienced classes with very large student numbers, often over 60, where teachers have had little or no opportunity to build relationships. In some cases students are referred to by a number. So for them there is little understanding of what it means to build relationships. In countries such as China and India teachers are highly respected and are the transmitters of knowledge with students expected to rote learn and reproduce the information in tests or exams. Their education experience is remarkably different from the experiences of students in today's Australian classrooms which are more student-centred and where learning, rather than teaching, is the focus. Thus it was not surprising when students were asked what surprised them most about Australian classrooms that all responses made some mention of bad student behaviour and their 'freedom to speak in class'.

International preservice teachers had the opportunity to apply for a volunteer mentor who was either a retired or practising professional. This was found to be particularly beneficial for some students, in improving their communication skills and understanding of western cultures. One student was taken by

her mentor on their family camping holiday. Others struggled to find time to meet (“*we only kept in touch for a short time*”) thus relationships did not develop.

Support workshops or focus groups were run on a weekly basis by study advisers to assist international preservice teachers with acculturation and provide additional academic support with essay writing, referencing, literature reviews and journal writing. Although in their open ended question they were positive about the support it gave them, it did not rate particularly highly in questions using a 5 point Likert scale. As the support workshop was not an official course it is possible that they did not view its value in the same way.

Table 3 Means of responses to relevant survey questions

Statements	Mean
1) The support workshops helped my academic studies	3.7
2) The English language course helped to improve my English speaking skills	3.4
3) The English language course helped improve my English written skills	3.2
4) The school visits in “Introduction to Australian Education” helped me to better understand the Australian education system	4.4
5) My school placement was a positive experience	4.0
6) My mentor teacher was very supportive	4.1
7) I feel confident about managing the learning environment	3.6
8) I feel confident teaching in English	3.3
9) I feel confident about my English literacy skills	3.1
10) I am confident about my content knowledge for my major learning area	4.1
11) I feel confident planning a lesson	4.1

Note: On a five point scale ranging from Strongly Agree=5 to Strongly Disagree=1

An English language program was included as a core course within the international strand of the program to provide additional support for non native English speakers. Feedback would suggest that it did not have the positive outcome as hoped, and may need to be customised to better meet the requirements of teacher education students. The responses however confirmed their concern about their own literacy skills. The responses to Questions 7, 10 & 11 did not necessarily reflect the concern expressed in the open ended questions about what they saw as their biggest challenges in their placement. They may not have associated these scales as specifically related to their performance in their placements, but rather with their development in their on campus studies. As many of the questions related specifically to their performance in the practicum it would appear that they wanted to give the impression of confidence.

Interviews with the 3 students further strengthened their concern about their ability to communicate effectively in the school context. One student noted that “*high school students do not use formal written English*” and that “*something like slangs is really difficult for me to pick up in such short period of time*”. Knowing the correct English terminology in their specialist areas continued to be a major concern. Another indicated that his mentor got really angry in a science experiment when he used the term ‘shake’ instead of ‘swirl’ – “*it’s too hard to identify the difference between the words*”. In addition the students did not understand how to build relationships which was expressed in the following way. “*Together with the language issue is the personality thing -how to open myself and forget the shame, to*

really involve in the conversation and participate in the school activities". Other concerns were about being well organised but flexible enough to adjust to the unexpected in school. *"I need to broaden my understanding of techniques necessary for student engagement- an animated voice and a greater range of interactive activities."* A third student expressed her concern about being seen as a loser and was so worried that she could not sleep or eat which resulted in a further loss of confidence. Where students were comfortable with the language they were better able to make the cultural adjustments, and had positive and rewarding experiences.

The university mentors further highlighted the language issues and the huge cultural adjustments that were needed. They noted that international preservice teachers were forced to focus too much on their language and so were not aware of student misbehaviour or absences. The focus was on their teaching rather than on student learning and therefore they were unable to effectively engage the students and manage their learning environment. One mentor asked the preservice teacher if she enjoyed teaching & the response was *"only if the mentor helps me"*. Particularly Chinese preservice teachers were considered too quiet and reserved and needed to be more assertive and project their voice in the classroom.

However the university mentors were also able to relate stories of success where international preservice teachers were confident with their language and had been able to make the cultural adjustments - *"the school just loved them"*. They acknowledged the diligence and hard work of international preservice teachers which made it particularly hard when they were unsuccessful.

Conclusion

Although the majority of international students are successful in their placements, language, familiarity with the school environment and their ability to engage students and effectively manage the learning environment are barriers that affect the quality of their placement reports. The data would suggest that the program is attempting to address specific needs but that additional support and changes are still needed. Many placement reports are satisfactory but having additional time would assist them in better demonstrating their ability, meeting the teaching standards and gaining employment. Increasing the IELTS may improve their functional English and may ensure some improvement in their academic and functional English, but it is unlikely to affect their understanding of the classroom language. However improved English skills may reduce some of the challenges that are impeded by the language.

The findings do indicate that greater support with the various forms of English language and cultural adaptations are needed. Also increased exposure to the school context and additional support within schools is also identified. To ensure their success it is vital that they have every opportunity to develop a good command of English and that they are supported in their teacher education studies and placement to make the cultural adjustments that will enhance their success as teachers.

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