

Adjustment Experiences of International Pre-Service Teachers through Community Service Engagement

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Abstract

Although studies on international student sojourn are growing, little is known about the experiences of international 'pre-service teachers' in Australia; a unique group of students who must adopt the role of both students and teachers. Anecdotal evidence suggest that pre-service teachers who have volunteered as mentors for schools demonstrate greater awareness of the general operational aspects of a school and thus, are better prepared for their teaching practicum. Yet, little is known about the mentoring experiences and the cross-cultural challenges of international students enrolled in the pre-service teacher program. By drawing on the preliminary findings of a larger study, this paper offers a hermeneutic view of the adjustment experiences of three international pre-service teachers who have volunteered to be mentors and tutors in a neighbourhood school and community centre. The aim is to extend previous research on cross-cultural adjustment, student mobility and community service engagement of tertiary students. The findings highlight a range of cultural and personal dimensions associated with the process of pre-service teacher professional development as well as their intercultural engagement with members in the host society. Hence, adjustment through community service engagement is viewed as an opportunity to increase intercultural and intracultural awareness to the international pre-service teachers.

Keywords

Adjustment experiences, community engagement, international pre-service teachers

Introduction

International student enrolment in Australian tertiary education is the highest amongst the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009). This increase in demand for Australian tertiary education qualification is driven by a number of factors including a student's desire to: (a) obtain skills to enable them to secure a stable and good employment; (b) attain a working visa and permanent residency upon graduation; and, (c) establish relationships with host nationals. Such motives to study in Australia may be linked with the student's choice of courses and level of commitment to engage in social integration activities (such as volunteering in the host community) to aid both adjustment and intercultural engagement.

Approximately nine per cent of international students choose to study Teacher Education (Australian Education International (AEI), 2009a). These students are known as international pre-service teachers. The low proportion of enrolments may reflect the focus of teacher education programmes which differ from other degrees because they may more readily be transferred to the home nation. In contrast, Australian Teacher Education is designed to train students to become future teachers in Australian schools. Thus, it may be assumed that this cohort is undertaking their studies with the ultimate goal of permanent migration.

International pre-service teachers must learn to adjust within the classroom as both a student, and as a teacher. Their experiences and success may be influenced by the determinants of their sojourn, the content of the courses and, their engagement in social integration activities such as volunteering in charity fundraising events or in schools (Dunstan, 2009; Lewis & Castley, 2008). While there is growth in the research examining student experiences with volunteering and community service (Bowman et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2009), there is a paucity of work considering the ways in which international students engage in such activities. Therefore, this paper extends previous research on cross-cultural adjustment taking a hermeneutic view of the experiences of three international pre-service teachers who have volunteered to be mentors and tutors in the local community.

Literature Review

International tertiary students face unique challenges adjusting to Australian higher education (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Andrade, 2006) requiring them to master differences between their own cultural norms, values and customs and those of their hosts (Bochner, 2003). Specifically, international students may experience different academic systems, communication differences, racial and ethnic distinctions, and a lack of social interactions with host students (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Brown & Daly, 2005; Brown, 2008; Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Leask, 2009; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward et al., 2001). These challenges, if not managed well, may create a high level of stress or 'culture shock' for the international students in adjusting to a new environment (Pedersen, 1991).

Adjustment can be viewed as a learning process whereby rules and norms of a foreign socio-cultural system have to be learnt in order to adjust effectively (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). It is assumed that through interacting with host nationals, the international students will obtain greater social support, become familiar with the host society's customs and norms, and enhanced language proficiency (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). In turn, international students who have successful relationships with local nationals experience greater satisfaction and happiness, improved self-esteem and, lower stress and depression (Ward et al., 2001).

Although a majority of international students have indicated their desire to know more Australian friends (AEI, 2007; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf & Kashima, 2010), many experience significant problems with social integration resulting in isolation and loneliness (e.g. Baker & Hawkins, 2006; Sawir et al., 2008). Barker, Daly and Colvin (2010) noted that there are a range of barriers to international students' engagement and inclusion both on- and off-campus including linguistic and cultural differences; differing attitudes and perceptions of engagement by international and local students, and institutional barriers. Diss' (2003) study conducted at Swinburne University of Technology found that a vast majority of Asian international students identified limited opportunities for them to develop social ties with local friends except those that were confined to the academic setting. Similarly, international students in Smart et al.'s (2000) study reported that after 12 months in Australia they did not feel they had an Australian friend to whom they could write when they returned home.

The paucity of social interaction between international and local students is a concern as it implies lack of opportunities to transform 'a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social connectivity and intercultural learning' (De Vita, 2007: p. 165, cited in Leask, 2009). Furthermore, building intercultural relations with local nationals is vital for international students' psychological, emotional, socio-cultural, and academic adjustment (e.g. Searle & Ward, 1990). Thus, the issue of social integration of international students remains a focus for universities and their staff (e.g. Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Robertson et al., 2000; Ryan, 2005).

Australian universities are recognising the importance of providing a diverse range of opportunities for social, learning, intercultural engagement and support vital for international students. Leask (2009) observed the changes in the attitudes of local students towards international students as a consequence of a mentoring program at the University of South Australia. Off-campus social integration activities which encourage intercultural engagement between local and international students include sports programs, social events such as weekend trips to Australian areas of interests or various types of clubs that add value to the international student experience studying in the university (Owens & Loomes, 2010). These activities are found to be beneficial for

promoting positive mental and emotional health, enhancing cultural transition and mitigating the negative effects of culture shock of many international students (Dunstan, 2009; Lewis & Castley, 2008).

Whilst much of the literature about the social integration of international students has focused on the efforts of universities, little is known about the experiences of international students who take their own initiative to integrate with the local community by volunteering. Increasingly universities in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom have given a renewed emphasis to the importance of service and community engagement for all students (e.g. Bowman et al., 2010; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). Community service engagement (such as mentoring at-risk youth, assisting teachers or building a garden for the local community) has found to positively influence various forms of personal development (e.g. Eyler & Giles, 1999). Students who have chosen to volunteer have reported a greater sense of duty and responsibility for others, a sense of purpose in life and better employability on graduating (e.g. Sullivan & Rosin, 2008; Pryor et al., 2007). For international students, community service may represent a strategic form of adjustment to a new culture; where successful adjustment relies not just on communication skills and knowledge (Gudykunst, 1998) but also coming to terms with the affective aspects of their adjustment process (Anderson, 1994). Engaging in community service may facilitate international students' social interaction with host nationals, through which students may develop new relations and social support networks in a new environment (Ward et al., 2001).

Therefore, given the lack of research examining the volunteering experiences of international students, this paper will examine the experiences of a group of international pre-service teachers during their community engagement endeavour. It also seeks to offer an account of how each person has experienced changes in self-understanding and embark on the journey of self-discovery as they learn to negotiate cultural differences through such unique experiences.

Method

This paper is part of a larger study which uses a hermeneutic approach to investigate the intercultural experiences of three non-native English speaking international pre-service teachers during their first year in Australia. This approach is drawn from phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1990) which allows the researchers to explore and interpret the experiential dimension of human actions and events.

International pre-service teachers enrolled at one Australian university who had volunteered in their local community for at least one semester were invited to participate in the research. To maintain students' anonymity, an invitation letter was sent electronically to all potential participants through the Programme Director, with interested students advised to contact the researchers directly. As detailed in Table 1, the two females and one male student who took part in the study were highly qualified professionals in their home country. Their community engagement included tutoring high school students and newly arrived immigrants and refugees, and volunteering at a local school.

Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews four times over a nine-month period, with each interview lasting up to two hours. Interview questions included: 1) Why did you choose to volunteer? 2) What was your experience of community service like? 3) What were your challenges? All the interviews were transcribed by the first author and were checked by the participants via email. The themes identified were drawn from the review of the literature and confirmed with an external evaluator; 100% inter-rater reliability was achieved. In order to maintain the integrity of the data, an extract from what the participant has said is presented alongside each theme (see Table 2).

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Name	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Community Engagement	Previous Professional Career	Years in career
Jacob	Israel	35	Male	Maths tutor in a high school	Lawyer	5
Asuntha	Sri Lanka	27	Female	English tutor for newly arrival immigrants in a community centre	English and History Tutor in Sri Lankan University	3
Mei	China	26	Female	Primary school volunteer	English language teacher in prestigious private school	10

Findings and Discussion

All three participants began their community involvement during the second semester of the academic year. They also shared a common vision for their community work—which was to enhance their personal profile for future job applications. However, attention is drawn to some of the features common to the participants' rich descriptions of their community service experience and what the experience means to them in relation to their adjustment processes.

Two themes have been clustered directly from participants' accounts to reveal why they have volunteered. Furthermore, within each theme, the three participants have also related how they have learnt to adjust cross culturally through the challenges encountered in their individual community engagement experience (see Table 2 for more details).

Table 2: Community engagement: A strategic adjustment

Theme 1: A response to personal growth
Jacob: I just see as cementing my purpose ... an evidence of progress.
Asuntha: ... as a human being to understand culture.
Mei: If you want to realise your dream, improve your English ...
Theme 2: A response to adjust to teach in Australian schools
Jacob: I meet students ... teachers ... teachers know me. This is learning. You learn where you live.
Asuntha I know... how to cater to their interests and different needs of different students.
Mei: You need to go out ... and then help people and people [will] help you.

Theme 1: A response to personal growth

The act of being out there to serve in a community outside the confines of university has become Asuntha's way of searching for an opportunity to relate with Australian nationals:

When you discuss with them about the culture difference, and you find that we are all very human ... with same needs ... I will always or we will always ... [be] segregate[d] on ethnicity, language, race and religion but eh... above all, we are human, we all have the same needs. We feel the same thing, we need love, compassion. Again coming to a country like this for the first time or second time, we all went through the same circumstances. Now they are going through the circumstances like I did a year before. (Asuntha)

The opportunity for personal growth was also grasped by the other two international students whose lives with their families back home contrasted with the people they came in contact with; particularly within the communities in which they were involved. This opportunity for personal growth was reflected in all their accounts:

I meet students, I meet teachers, they are exceptional. You are being accepted, you are part of them, you know they give freely to you, teachers know me. This is learning. You learn where you live. (Jacob)

... it seems like there is a boundary, maybe not wall, but there is the fence... and ok you can see each other through the fence, through the wall, and you need to build a door in order to come in ... so language is way but it is not the only way, but you know it is something you needed it to communicate to other people and let people understand you and if you can articulate your ideas very clearly to other people and make your message deeply across and make it easier for other people to understand you, you will go beyond survival level because if you say

go shopping, you don't need language. You say hello, thank you ... but if you want to be more involved in this society and you want to understand more, you have to go beyond the survival level. (Mei)

Such personal growth that is deemed 'beyond the survival level' has also led to a growth in tolerance and acceptance of how they were treated by the host nationals. For instance, Asuntha was given a 'harsh strange look' by the receptionist working in the community centre when she first introduced herself as a new English Tutor to teach a group of newly arrived immigrants:

... with the receptionist ... she ... she is not good with me ... is not very friendly and I don't know why from the first day, I was in tears (silence). She thought I am a student (silence). She asked me for two dollars the first day and I was so shocked and I am here for tutoring. She asked tutoring for what... in English? She gave a harsh ... strange look ... she might not have expected that because I am dark ... she said ok ... you just ... you can take a seat ... when [the coordinator] came I introduced myself, still she thought I am a student ... but my coordinator is understanding... she is very friendly but not the receptionist. She has still not spoken to me ... I have to be friends with her ... whenever she sees me she says ... take a seat while ... she just pretended she didn't see me. (Asuntha)

Despite this treatment from the receptionist, Asuntha continued her commitment to meet her students every week for almost two months before she had to leave them to teach in a school to which she was assigned. Instead of avoiding uncomfortable cross-cultural situations, Asuntha responded positively and sought this experience as an opportunity for learning and personal growth. Asuntha's response is an example of Taylor's (1994) study on explaining the link between learning to be interculturally competent with Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation; whereby the personal conflicting experiences of sojourners may alter their view of their world from different perspectives.

Theme 2: A response to adjust to teach in Australian schools

Jacob's account captured much of the participants' strategic intention of volunteering which is related to learning how to adjust to Australian educational practices:

... since I want to become at some stage a Maths teacher, being a tutor now confirms it when I graduate.. It is all kinds of reasons, it is personal and professional reasons ... its the terminology that you need to know ... the specific words. I don't want to study it but be ready for it. (Jacob)

In order to succeed professionally and academically, Jacob's reasons were associated with the need to adjust by learning relevant skills and knowledge that were specific to a new culture. As Argyle (1982) and Bochner (2003) point out, it is the sojourner's abilities to interact cross-culturally and implement appropriate social behaviours that will more likely help to achieve their professional and personal goals. In Jacob's case, it is the need to understand not just *what*, but also *how* to teach a particular subject in a diverse environment that drives him to volunteer in a high school.

For Mei, her motivation to volunteer was in response to her anxiety regarding her perceived language ability. Despite this anxiety, her volunteering experience has indirectly increased a greater self-awareness and confidence to speak out during group discussions:

I have not worked with the local students in group work but sometimes we do have small group discussions, they always pick me when the teacher invites groups to present. They say that Mei has a good idea ... You will feel nervous at the beginning because English is not your first language but then I will look at this from a different perspective, everybody knows that English is not my first language; why should I feel stressed for. (Mei)

Unlike the U-curve model of cross-cultural adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955; Adler, 1975), which suggests that sojourners experience culture shock that grows out of unfamiliarity with a new culture, none of the participants described a feeling of lost or faltering identity despite facing various types of conflicting and challenging situations. In fact, what is so interesting is that they have reframed what many would seek to avoid at all costs as

'negative' experience in the U-curve model (such as, feeling isolated; unable to cope) into an opportunity for learning and personal development so that they can be more prepared to teach in Australia. To a certain extent, community service engagement is a form of social integration strategy for them. Despite being treated as 'international students' by the others in the local community, this study reveals the re-positioning of international students as experts for taking on the roles as mentors and tutors serving the needs of the local community.

Regardless of the differences in culture values, learning and teaching practices, what remains clear for these participants is their willpower to resist the stereotypes they faced as international students. Although existing research (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Ellwood, 2000) already shows that too often international students—particularly for Asian students—have been portrayed by Australian academics as not being able to reach high standards existing in Australia; the participants have used the cross-cultural encounters as a vehicle to confront existential issues about what constitutes the self (Adler, 1975; Madison, 2006; Todres, 2002). However, whether these stereotypes of Asian students do truly fit reality have been debated (Ellwood, 2000). Underlying many of these stereotype ideas is the assumption that the principles of Australian education system are undeniably superior—instead of being different from those existing in their home country (Vandermesbrugge, 2004). Still, the participants in this study are very conscious of their purpose for leaving the comfort of the familiar and have chosen to remain in the journey of self-discovery (Montuori & Fahim, 2004). Jacob's account captured much of what it was like for other international pre-service teachers like him:

There is no short cut here in Australia. This is not my country that I can go with my logic and that's it is alright most of the doors are already opened and that now I am a teacher and I have good record. Here I am starting from scratch, they don't care about my previous qualifications, they care about my current abilities and this is how it should be and there is no other short cut but to just push yourself now.

And yes, when I push myself now there are certain things that I benefit ... first of all, personally, I enjoy. It is good I looking forward for it every week. It's nice with the students ... I am not sitting with children in general and for my long term objectives, I am enabling myself to grow closer to really teaching good schools because I am an international student, I am not [an] Australian. I think if I were Australian, I would prefer... first ... I know maybe ... because it is not my language, I don't know but I just want to be good, when I give my resume and I have one year and a half experience of tutoring so not only do I help children to cope, it is reciprocal, it also helps me. It is both together. It will assist me in the future. (Jacob)

It is unsurprising that Jacob's experience involved change in cultural outlook that has an effect on personal and professional attitudes. As Todres (2002) has pointed out, it is pertinent to think of the process of change international sojourns underwent as a therapeutic pause in life they have so far constructed. However, for Asuntha and Mei, it was their choice to change in personal and professional attitudes rather than cultural outlook that was more prevalent:

I am responsible for their future. Teaching is not just teaching content but also about life. (Asuntha)

This country gives me a lot of new ideas and opportunity. I will contribute my share, knowledge, and appreciate wisdom. (Mei)

Such attitudinal change in personal and professional conduct was seen to have enabled them to develop greater competence of cross-cultural adjustment to the education practices in Australia.

Conclusion

This paper offers an inside view of what is experienced by international pre-service teachers through the lens of hermeneutic approach to understand their experiences. It reveals the power that sojourn has to effect on personal philosophy and self-understanding, and intercultural competence. The participants reported the unique challenges they faced because of difference brought by multicultural settings, geographical and cultural distance from home, and in turn, how this has created uncertainty regarding their professional identity of an 'Australian teacher'. As such, there is a need to consider how Australian Teacher Education curriculum and policy can be shaped to better support the adjustment and learning process of international pre-service teachers. However,

there is scope for recognising that community service involvement can further enhance the adjustment competence and learning between initial teacher education and induction for international pre-service teachers.

This study provides evidence that community service engagement may enhance international pre-service teachers' adjustment. To further understand the positive impacts of community engagement involvement of international pre-service teachers on their adjustment, however, studies need to examine what kinds of community activities will be beneficial for greater intercultural adjustment to teach in Australian classrooms and how will their social interaction with the host nationals be enhanced. Such information on these aspects may be useful for planning and designing programmes targeted at developing international pre-service teachers' level of social engagement with host nationals.

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Acknowledgements

The first author wishes to express her gratitude to her supervisors, Dr Amanda Daly and Dr Peter Willis, for their encouragement and guidance at various stage of this research endeavour. The first author also wishes to thank all the interviewees who have opened their hearts to share their personal stories with her.

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