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Forms, foci and forces: The need for overseas pre-service teacher professional experiences

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Introduction to the notion of story

This paper represents the first analytic foray into a “narrative inquiry” that focused on collecting data centered on understanding the impact of an overseas professional teaching experience on twenty pre-service teachers. Research in this paradigm seeks to explore the breadth and depth of individual’s ‘lived experience’. A key axiomatic position regarding data collection and data analysis in a ‘lived experience’ project is that the human condition is grounded in the nature and nuances of the narratives we each tell ourselves. These narratives are deeply hermeneutic in nature

and are contextually situated, cyclical, transient, multi-voiced and are constantly being reframed.

...the human experience is basically a storied experience, ...humans live out stories and are storytelling organisms (Connelly and Clandinin, 1994, p.4046).

However, in order to understand the multi-threaded strands of the ‘storied worlds’ of others, one of the key facets of analysis in this form of inquiry is the development of an understanding of the background findings, or responsive narratives, of other researchers. In developing an understanding of these

“*The human condition is grounded in the nature and nuances of the narratives we each tell ourselves*”



[Photography: Peter Beamish]

research threads the elements they reveal and define offer “mobile spotlights” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 49) so that the “acts of daily living become understandable because of some primary framework that informed them” (Goffman, 1975, p. 26).

Hence, the following pages and paragraphs represent our initial ‘mobile lens’ of understanding in regard to how an overseas professional teaching experience can provide an opportunity to develop greater skills and more global understandings that can be transferred back into the national domestic sphere.

Introduction to a global story

First time teachers in Australia are more likely to find their first jobs in hard-to-staff, low performing, rural, and central city schools. These have higher proportions of minority and low-income students (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). In order to cope with these types of teaching positions it has been proposed that pre-service teachers would benefit greatly from being exposed to the types of experiences that reflect both the demands and responsibilities indicative of their first year of teaching. Initial research suggests that professional teaching experiences, including those in developing countries, are a powerful alternative to be included in a pre-service teacher preparation program; particularly when faced with a shortage of school placements in some Australian cities. However, there are more important reasons.

Globalisation and an increase in international mobility over the past decade have heightened the need to provide young Australians with an “appreciation of and respect for social, cultural and religious diversity, and a sense of global citizenship” (Melbourne Declaration, 2008, p.4). While in the past schooling may have played a role in preparing learners to understand and relate with their own culture, learners now require the added ability to build relationships with people from other countries and develop a global identity. Teacher education institutions are called to demonstrate that they are adequately preparing their pre-service teachers for this mandate by demonstrating knowledge, understanding and teaching strategies for students from “diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds” (AITSL, 2011, p.8). Some argue that an educational response aimed at achieving this outcome will be ineffective without a real life encounter involving people from diverse backgrounds, in overseas contexts (Pettigrew, 2001).

Pre-service teachers often choose ‘domestic’ professional teaching experiences more out of convenience and the potential to achieve a pleasing

grade, than to ensure an adequate preparation for their first year of teaching. While a well-meaning ‘sheltered’ supervision of pre-service teachers may create an unrealistic experience, there is also the real risk of developing ‘teacher identities’ that prove to be inadequate when graduates commence their role as independent full-time teachers. It appears that by attempting to protect pre-service teachers, programs are essentially preventing them from the necessary growth that is required for their survival. Initial teacher education programs would thus benefit their pre-service teacher education students in designing professional teaching experiences that ensure deep involvement in a wide range of settings, by including culturally diverse communities, and also non-school settings (Ramsey, 2000).

Overseas professional teaching experiences—the stories others tell

Benefits outlined

It is important, firstly, to note that there is a variety of potential overseas professional teaching experiences (OPTE). Cwick & Benton (2009) mention, “Short Term (2-3 weeks), Long term (8-16 weeks), one way exchanges, bilateral exchanges and multilateral exchanges”. Other stories being told include the experiences of cultural immersion and language programs. While we have no doubt that these stories are worth listening to, the stories we have focused on primarily feature overseas professional teaching experiences. In particular, there appears to be a need to fully understand the impact that an overseas pre-service teaching experience has in creating a nexus between personal and professional identity. In doing so, the problems of ‘teacher fragility and vulnerability’ in the first years of teaching could be overcome (McCormack, Gore and Thomas, 2006).

Student teaching placements in international destinations have been found to result in personal and professional growth greater than one might expect in a traditional domestic student teaching placement (Stachowski, Bodle, Morrin, 2008). From listening to the stories of others it appears that the major benefits of overseas professional teaching experiences include increases in genuine multicultural education, global mindedness, reflection, flexibility, commitment, and the development of personal identity. A closer look at some key areas may be instructive in building a case for OPTE for pre-service teachers.

Cultural diversity

Overseas professional teaching experiences are linked, most commonly, to an improvement in a pre-service teacher’s cultural competence in the classroom (Meaney et al., 2008). While Australian

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classrooms are becoming more culturally diverse, most teachers do not see themselves as ready to teach in multicultural classrooms and have not been prepared to teach for diversity (Gibson, 2004). For teachers to truly understand how it feels to be perceived as the ‘other’ they must leave the comfort of their home communities for an extended period of time. This highlights the need for pre-service teachers to have significant cross-cultural experiences that enable them to teach and work with, and continue to learn from, people different from themselves. “Overseas student teaching can be the catalyst that starts teachers on a path of learning from others: Their students, their colleagues, the community, and their world,” argue Cushner & Mahon (2002, p. 56).

University teacher preparation programs recognise the importance of multicultural education. It is a requirement in their courses, but it continues to be taught from a ‘cognitive orientation’ despite the extensive research that demonstrates the critical role that *experience* plays in enhancing intercultural development (Cushner, 2007). Involvement of pre-service teachers in readings, discussions and even domestic relationships with different ethnic and linguistic minorities has proved insufficient in multicultural education (Quezada, 2004).

Interaction with different cultures overseas, on the other hand, has proved to be the only real way to break down cultural barriers and create understanding (Pettigrew, 2001). Faulconer (2003) reported on the importance of observing children in Mexico as a way of challenging and breaking down pre-service teachers prejudices of culturally different others. Pettigrew (2001), after conducting an extensive review of more than 200 studies of ethnic contact, highlighted the fact that international contact—excluding tourist experiences—was shown to be far more beneficial in reducing prejudice than inter-ethnic contact at home.

Prospective teachers, report Hollins and Guzman (2005), often hold negative attitudes about different cultures and are unwilling to teach in schools that tended to be more ethnically diverse. This is obviously a major challenge currently facing teacher education institutions, as teachers are increasingly required to work successfully with an increasingly diverse pupil population, including children who differ in language, culture, ethnicity and race (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

Today’s teachers are expected to approach learning and teaching inclusively. Hence it is vital that they have an appreciation of all learners in their classrooms and value their differences. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) suggest that the best way to

reduce intergroup prejudice is by way of intergroup contact. Not only do attitudes between immediate participants involved in the contact become more favourable, but also the attitudes between the entire out-group as well as out-group members in other situations, and “even out-groups not involved in the contact” (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006, p. 766). This study suggests that an experience such as an overseas professional teaching experience is likely to have a profound effect not only on how pre-service teachers approach their future students from diverse backgrounds, but also on how they approach all students—once thought of as different.

These conclusions are positively supported by other researchers. They have commented, that students engaged in international field experiences become “less prone to prejudice students, based on cultural background, linguistic differences, or even learning disability” (Willard-Holt, 2001, p. 515). Fung King Lee, (2011), mentions that participants in overseas experiences have been found to be more open to cultural diversity, more accepting of difference, and more understanding of people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Pre-service teachers on overseas professional teaching experiences are challenged by the place and culture they find themselves, as they are often forced to “wrestle with complex thoughts, emotions, and behaviors” (Mahon, 2010, p.9). Participants in these contexts often begin to question parts of their own culture that may have previously gone unexamined, in light of the new world in which they find themselves. Consequently, they often increase in cultural sensitivity, viewing their own country, their existing beliefs and themselves from a different perspective (Quezada, 2004). OPTEs have also been found to help increase students’ patience and empathy (Willard-Holt, 2001; Faulconer, 2003).

Effective multicultural education goes beyond an understanding about different cultures and results in a deep respect and value for others. Pre-service teachers involved in OPTEs become advocates for teaching practices that embrace diversity, including empathy for students from other cultures and of different language backgrounds (Bryan and Sprague, 1997).

Global mindedness

All now live in a global society. Alfaro (2008) highlights the importance of OPTEs in enhancing and increasing the global skills needed as educators to enter internationally-minded schools and classrooms of the future. Similarly, Stachowski and

Sparks (2007) state that when pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to gain international classroom experience they are far more likely to understand the concepts of global community and interconnectedness and seek to instil this transformational way of thinking in their future students.

If teachers are truly responsible for “preparing today’s students to take their place as global citizens”, as Mahon suggests (2010, p. 7), then incorporating an overseas professional teaching experience in a pre-service teachers preparation program will be highly beneficial. Consequentially, pre-service teachers often return home with a broader outlook on how they see the world and themselves, which can impact their future classrooms (Quezada, 2004).

Creativity and resourcefulness

A typical comment from student teacher’s involved in OPTEs includes “We had limited resources overseas. We were forced to be creative!” (Bryan and Sprague, 1997, p. 201). Studies have highlighted the increased flexibility and resourcefulness that resulted from overseas professional teaching experiences (Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2006). It appears that when pre-service teachers participate in OPTEs, specifically in developing countries, they are often without internet, libraries, and technology (including photocopiers and data projectors) and subsequently have to rely more heavily on their own creativity and resourcefulness.



Heightened self-efficacy

For many students, the overseas professional teaching experience represents the first time they have had to rely solely on themselves (Cushner & Mahon, 2002). Challenges are often encountered by pre-service teachers while overseas, including culture shock, dislodgement and the new environment that they are required to live and teach in (Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2006). Typically pre-service teachers experience a bell-shaped phenomenon where they initially experience excitement, followed closely by significant dysphoria, and ending in enjoyment (Firmin, Firmin, & MacKay, 2007). It is during the dysphoria that pre-service teachers are provided with the opportunity to overcome difficulties and develop strategies to cope with demanding experiences.

To successfully overcome these challenges, they are often forced to face their personal anxieties and test their own perceived limitations (Cushner & Mahon, 2002). Empowerment and efficacy result from drawing on inner resources through times of challenge and cognitive dissonance (Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2006; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). The process of successfully overcoming their personal anxieties and “testing their own limitations” facilitates major growth and participants report an increase in “self confidence and esteem, increased adaptability, resourcefulness, and persistence” (Cushner & Mahon, 2002, p. 51).

Accordingly, one would expect pre-service teachers with a heightened level of self-efficacy to be optimistic and resilient about their abilities even in the face of adversity. As a result of increased confidence and self-belief—related to who they are as persons and teachers; their personal identity and professional understanding is more likely to be resilient and durable in the future. Teaching experience in domestic practicums appears to be a space less likely to develop these necessary traits.

Increased commitment

It has been suggested that a relationship may exist between those students who have completed an overseas professional teaching experience and high levels of commitment to the teaching profession (Bryan and Sprague, 1997). Hackett and Lavery (2010) highlight the importance of pre-service teachers developing a deep sense of their vocation as teachers when they describe vocation as work that is of service to others, while at the same time providing people with a sense of identity and meaning.

In a study of ten teachers involved in an overseas professional teaching experience, it was found that this cohort showed increased levels of long-

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term commitment to the profession of teaching on their return as demonstrated by higher levels of teaching time and higher rates of further study. While this area needs more investigation, if overseas professional teaching experiences were shown to conclusively increase the commitment of pre-service teachers, OPTEs would be extremely valuable for initial teacher education institutions to implement, including combating current dilemmas with regard to teacher drop out.

Enhanced collaboration and collegiality

Rather than sending individual teachers to separate locations, overseas professional teaching experiences often involve *groups* of pre-service teachers together. This is referred to as ‘clustering’ and allows for pre-service teachers to support each other within learning communities, including university mentors available to support both the pre-service teachers and their supervising teachers (Le Cornu, 2010, p. 197). The notion of a learning community contrasts the ‘sink and swim’ and ‘do it yourself’ view of student teaching in the typical practicum. Experiences that incorporate a learning community approach, like OPTEs, indicate that learners not only take responsibility for their own survival but also take on responsibility for the well-being and learning of their peers (Le Cornu, 2010).

Pre-service teachers quickly learn the importance of working collaboratively with their team members in overseas professional teaching experiences as it is only by sharing ideas and supporting each other that each teacher is able to overcome the challenges faced. From a social constructivist viewpoint, where learning occurs by constructing meanings, *vis a vis* ‘absorbing’ them from another, involving pre-service teachers in an active, communal and collaborative environment is theoretically sound (Bruner, 1987).

OPTEs include many shared experiences. As a result, collegial relationships are often developed between university academics and pre-service teachers and between pre-service teachers and their peers (Robertson & Weber, 2000). The trust and respect that exists in this learning community may well provide the pre-service teacher with the perfect environment to be willing to be themselves, share their story with their peers and teachers collegially, and possibly for the first time experience real learning in an air of freedom.

Challenges that reflect reality

It has been suggested that in many ways OPTEs may closely reflect the experiences of a first year graduate teacher. Both experiences are exposed to significant challenges and high levels of responsibility (Walters,

Garii & Walters, 2009). While this causes increased stress, it far better simulates the environment that teachers find themselves in during their first year of teaching. The advantage of experiencing the true nature of teaching earlier is that they are sharing this experience with other pre-service teachers and are therefore able to support and relate to others experiencing the same crisis. Pre-service teachers are therefore given the opportunity to grow in a supportive environment and develop personal confidence, which should sustain them in their future teaching careers. This supportive environment offers the individual the opportunity to take risks in regard to developing the nexus between what they have learnt in lectures with their own personal belief system. Thus, the personal and professional identity can more fully mesh. It has been suggested that this nexus is vital for a teacher’s ongoing commitment to the profession, as well as the development of authentic learning spaces (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust & Schulman, 2005).

Reflection

Simply experiencing classroom culture is not enough. As Cattley (2007) has argued, deep reflection is the key to developing a sound teaching identity whereby the concepts of teaching and learning become glued into a professional whole. This melding through reflection would appear to ensure a more focussed classroom. Smith (2009) argues that overseas professional teaching is a powerful professional development opportunity that further enhances this force. It should be nurtured and supported, as students are forced to question many of their perspectives. As a result, in such times of transition, reflection is always promoted as people are making sense of their new environments and of making sense of who they are professionally.

Two significant transitions occur during any overseas teaching experience. The first transition occurs during entry into the host country and the second upon re-entry into the home country. Students always return changed as a result as they see themselves, their world, and their professions differently. There is agreement that pre-service teachers have been found to become more reflective as a result of an overseas professional teaching experience (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Robertson & Webber, 2000).

Probably the single most important attribute in becoming a quality teacher is reflective practice. When pre-service teachers develop the art of consistently reflecting on teaching experiences they continually grow and discover their voice in explaining why they do the things they do in the

“*Reflecting on teaching experiences, they continually grow and discover their voice in explaining why they do the things they do in the classroom*”

classroom. Dewey (1933, p.12), describes a two-part process in reflection which helps to explain why overseas teaching experiences are so powerful in developing the art of reflection.

First, learners experience a state of doubt and perplexity in which thinking begins. OPTEs are ideal for creating mostly unavoidable difficulties to ensure real thinking results. The environments and cultures the pre-service teachers live and work in are often far removed from what they once considered normal. These challenges often lead to pre-service teachers questioning who they are as people and teachers and reflecting on their own ability to cope with the demands they are facing. “It is precisely the difficult experiences encountered during the adjustment process that seem to be what people remember and that facilitates the resulting growth” (Cushner, 2007, p. 32).

The second part of the reflection process, according to Dewey (1933), involves the learners searching to find answers to resolve the doubt and settle and dispose of the perplexity. OPTEs promote this part of the process also. The doubts and perplexities that pre-service teachers experience are not hypothetical and therefore foster a real life teaching experience, where answers to doubts are essential. If pre-service teachers are to survive their teaching experience, they are required to develop adequate answers to resolve doubts they initially experienced.

OPTEs in developing countries: Stories yet to be told

Very little research has taken place in relation to the impact of overseas professional teaching experiences in developing countries on pre-service teachers’ ‘stories of self’. Despite the limited existing knowledge in this area, it appears there is much to be learned, and this motivates the current research project investigating pre-

service teachers on overseas professional teaching experiences in developing countries. The story of present understandings is shared to provide enough evidence to justify the continuation of our OPTEs allowing ‘our real story’ to be told in the not too distant future. In the process, this story will undergo some changes. Present understandings, will be questioned, but ‘the voice’ is expected to become stronger, clearer, and increase in trustworthiness in the process.

The context of and platform for the continuing story

Providing the context of stories is often as important as the stories themselves (Cresswell, 2009) and here enables better understanding of these OPTEs and MOTO in particular.

MOTO stands for the *Ministry Of Teaching Overseas* program run by the School of Education at Avondale College of Higher Education. The college’s motto ‘A greater vision of world needs’ highlights the emphasis it places on preparing its graduates for a life of service in their communities.

Each year, all primary and secondary pre-service teachers—approximately 500 or more—are expected to complete a professional teaching experience component. Every student is given an opportunity to complete one professional teaching experience (15 days of teaching) in a developing country, as part of their four-year degree course. Presently, about one half of all pre-service teachers choose a MOTO experience in place of one of their ‘normal domestic’ professional teaching experiences.

The 2013 cohort who completed a MOTO experience chose between three different locations: India, Cambodia or Nepal. All three experiences provided the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to teach in classrooms with very basic facilities, few resources or little equipment.

“All MOTO experiences attempt to facilitate a learning community through the demonstration of quality teaching and running professional development workshops for the host teachers”



The selected overseas schools highly value the opportunity to host pre-service teachers from Australia, as many of their teachers have had little higher education and see it as an opportunity to learn. All MOTO experiences attempt to facilitate a learning community through the demonstration of quality teaching and by an Australian lecturer running professional development workshops for the host teachers

Whenever possible the pre-service teachers live as part of the community in which they are teaching, learning and serving. The accommodation chosen, the food eaten, and the lifestyle maintained while teaching closely reflect the lives of the locals. Pre-service teachers are each required to daily become involved in a service based community activity in addition to their teaching responsibilities. This aims to connect pre-service teachers individually with the local community and build quality relationships with the local people.

A MOTO experience, however, is not limited to the teaching component alone. In total, most MOTO experiences run for approximately 30 days with another 8 months of preparation time. An overview of the process might be helpful at this point.

Decision to go — Pre-service teachers sign up for the experience in November of the year before they take part in the experience.

Pre-trip course — Beginning in March of the year of departure all MOTO participants take part in a weekly preparation program run by the academics responsible for supervising the teams overseas. Some weeks all of the participants meet together to discuss common areas and other weeks they meet according to the country team they are involved in. The pre-trip course covers topics such as culture, safety, team expectations, teaching strategies, language immersion, and logistics. Pre-service teachers generally begin bonding as a team during these experiences.

Social events prior to departure — In recognition of the value of a united team, each country team plans two social events prior to departure as an opportunity to get to know each other before being thrown into the challenge of overseas teaching. These events attempt to build community, facilitate supportive relationships, and build excitement prior to departure.

Planning with family — While planning takes place at a team level, individuals also plan individually often with the help of their individual families. The families are highly involved in the preparation process prior to departure, support

is provided via emails and phone calls during the experience, and in sharing the many stories told by the participant on their return.

Teaching experience — While the operating time of each school differs, what does remain consistent is the independence and responsibility that each pre-service teacher experiences in their overseas classrooms. Typically the host supervisors open up their schools and classrooms and require that pre-service teachers take full teaching responsibilities on arrival. Teaching takes up the majority of the school day, often with little involvement from the local teachers. Generally, pre-service teachers can choose to teach on their own or with a peer.

Team workshops/reflection — In addition to teaching responsibilities all MOTO participants meet each morning before school begins to take part in a short (approximately 15-minute) team worship. Generally these workshops are taken by a different team member each morning and are a chance to share what they have learnt about themselves, their everyday or spiritual life, from their experiences. It is also a time of encouragement and team bonding. Each evening all teams gather again and for approximately 20 minutes are involved in a team debriefing session. This usually begins with a team affirmation session and opportunity for individuals to share the highlights and challenges of their day. This is usually a real highlight of the day as participants share their stories, support each other, and make decisions as a team that will direct the next day's events. Journal writing also occurs on an individual level each day.

Service project — Each participant, independently, is involved in their local community with a focus on service for an hour a day while teaching. Their service project must involve working with locals; and whenever possible, this is completed apart from their team members. This encourages participants to once again step out of their comfort zone and form relationships with local people. In the past pre-service teachers have helped with cooking, read to/with children in orphanages, helped locals plant rice, or entertained children by playing games.

Travel component — This takes place after the teaching component is completed. As a team, all participants are involved in a joint-adventure while overseas. The India team travelled across India exploring places such as Varanasi, the Taj Mahal, and Delhi. The Cambodian team travelled to a rural village before flying to Luang Prabang (Laos), while the Nepal team was involved in a 9-day trek to Annapurna Base Camp.

“While we have been ‘given a glimpse of the conductor at work’, the score has yet to be fully developed and written—a story that is still forming”

Although the context of the story may be helpful for a fuller appreciation, in a sense it is only what a frame is to a picture. Much more of the story needs to be told.

An unfinished story

Using a music metaphor, what has been heard at present is really an 'unfinished symphony'. It is not unlike a cantata in which the voices of soloists and that of the choir have yet to be heard. There is a reason for this, of course. While we have been 'given a glimpse of the conductor at work', the score has yet to be fully developed and written—a story that is still forming; consisting of many individual stories that will contribute to the 'genre of authentic teacher identity'. **TEACH**

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