



Developing intercultural learning in Australian pre-service teachers through participating in a short term mobility program in Malaysia

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Ten Australian pre-service teachers engaged in a mobility program in Malaysia.
- Intensive interaction with Malaysian peers promoted intercultural learning.
- Participants developed critical self-awareness, affiliation, empathy for diversity.
- A short term mobility program should be embedded in teacher preparation courses.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intercultural learning of 10 Australian pre-service teachers participating in a short term mobility program in Malaysia. Drawing on Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, intercultural learning is conceptualised as developing three capabilities: critical cultural self-examination; affiliation with and towards others; and building narrative imagination. Our findings confirmed that participation in this structured mobility experience promoted critical professional self-awareness regarding cultural diversity; built trust and intercultural understanding through intensive interaction with Malaysian peers; and developed participants as more culturally responsive teachers. We recommend that a structured short term mobility experience be embedded within teacher education programs.

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1. Introduction

Within teacher education, short term mobility programs are being seen as a possible way of developing a new generation of teachers as interculturally capable to work with increasing student diversity in their classrooms (Santoro, 2014). As defined by Cope and Kalantzis (2009, p. 173) diversity is “differences of experience, interest, orientation to the world, values, dispositions, sensibilities, social languages and discourses. And insofar as one person inhabits many lifeworlds (home, professional, interest,

affiliation), their identities are multi-layered. Diversity, in fact, has become a paradoxical universal.” Diversity in educational contexts is an issue of global relevance, in a world experiencing “super-diversity”, where traditional patternings of immigrant and ethnic minority populations and social communities are being replaced by complex contemporary transnational flows with multiple origins and differing socio-economic characteristics (Vertovec, 2007). Teachers need to be interculturally adept to respond to the issues raised by this superdiversity in our classrooms and as citizens across the world. Short term mobility programs, such as the one we report on, and the impact they have, contribute to this broader space.

In education contexts, the “diversity gap” between teachers and their students has been noted in the US, where nearly half the students attending public schools are from minority backgrounds,

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fewer than one in five of their teachers is from a nonwhite background (Boser, 2014). A teacher/student diversity gap also exists in Australia (Mills, 2008) where over 26% of students in Australian school classrooms are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Developing the intercultural capacity of teachers is one way of trying to bridge this diversity gap.

Intercultural capacity is also acknowledged as an integral characteristic of 21st century skills for all higher education graduates; particularly for education students, who as future teachers need to demonstrate these skills themselves in addition to developing them in their school children (Bridgstock & Hearn, 2012). The *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025* (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013), which provides the vision of Malaysian education from preschool to higher education, incorporates a focus on the intercultural within its six primary attributes. Leadership skills, for example, are identified as including the ability to work across cultures, and one of the indicators of successful schooling is that “every student leaves school as a global citizen imbued with core, universal values ... [and] a willingness to embrace peoples of other nationalities, religions and ethnicities” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, p. E.13). Core graduate attributes stated by all Australian universities in their websites include *a global perspective and sense of citizenship* as one of their five leading attributes (Donleavy, 2012). The Australian government’s New Colombo Plan was established in 2014 to support Australian undergraduates to study and take up internships regionally (Australian Government, 2015). The New Colombo Plan acknowledges the importance of including an overseas immersion experience as “a rite of passage” within university education, encouraging future teachers to become Asia literate in ways that enable them to have broad insight into the cultures and histories of the countries of the Asia region – a region that exerts considerable influence globally and in Australia (Henderson, 2015). In our discussions of cultures in this paper, we draw on Spencer-Oatey’s (2008, p. 3) conceptual definition:

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behavior.

Developing the intercultural capacity of our future teachers is of paramount importance. In Australia, as in other Western Anglo-centric countries, current mainstream educational discourses often represent non-Anglo students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds through a deficit lens (Alford, 2014). Such discourses remain largely unquestioned by the predominantly Anglo middle-class pre-service teachers who “frequently describe themselves as ‘only Australian’ and see non-Anglo-Australians as the ones who have an ethnicity” (Mills, 2008, p. 270). A student mobility program offers preservice teachers the opportunity to step outside such taken-for-granted beliefs about themselves and “others”, and can lead to intercultural learning (Allard & Santoro, 2006). As a group of globally-minded teacher educators, one of our prime interests in establishing a structured, 2-week short term mobility program for pre-service teachers was to develop the participants’ intercultural capacity.

There is a growing corpus of international research that has noted positive outcomes from short term mobility programs which incorporate sociocultural, pedagogical and language learning experiences for pre-service teachers (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006). New understandings of both teaching and learning a second language have resulted from such programs within initial teacher education (Lee, 2009). Positive outcomes seem not to be reliant on

the length of time spent immersed overseas. Pence and Macgillivray (2008) record that their American pre-service teachers developed awareness and respect for cultural diversity from their 4-week practicum in Italy. From an immersion experience lasting only one week in Pachuca, Mexico, 27 American pre-service teachers reported increased levels of empathy and flexibility in working with culturally and linguistically diverse children and felt more globally connected: “we were part of a world of teachers” (Willard-Holt, 2001, p. 511).

While the mobility experience can have a strong impact, questions have arisen regarding whether pre-service teachers can develop a more “critical cultural awareness” (Byram, 2008), an emergent sociopolitical awareness and critical consciousness of power inequities and privilege through their study abroad, especially when their immersion experience is only of a short duration (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017, p. 53).

Assumptions of positive intercultural outcomes accruing simply by participating in such a program are shown to be unwarranted (Dockrill, Rahatzad, & Phillion, 2015; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012). Instead, negative stereotypes can be confirmed if participants are not supported with a means of reflecting productively on challenging elements of their overseas immersion experiences (Scoffham & Barnes, 2009; Tang & Choi, 2004). The importance of guided reflection in the professional development of teachers is acknowledged in the research literature (Ryan & Ryan, 2013), and in particular to support pre-service teachers in productively processing their observations and experiences while abroad (Vatalaro, Szente, & Levin, 2015).

Two research questions guided this study:

1. From the participants’ perspectives, what factors in the mobility experience, if any, enable intercultural learning?
2. How does this intercultural learning impact the participants as future educators?

To operationalise the concept of intercultural learning in this particular paper, we draw on Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach, which she has been developing over more than two decades (Nussbaum, 1986, 1997, 2000, 2006, 2011). Nussbaum offers a foundational framework of 10 central human capabilities that she posits are essential to human development, and which focus on “what people are actually able to do and to be – in a way informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 5). Deploying this Capabilities Approach places intercultural learning within the bigger context of a social justice framework, focused on human development and global citizenship (Comim, 2014). In this context, global citizenship can be conceptualised as a state of mind; an awareness of the wider context in which citizens are located in ways that go beyond the nation state. This notion of citizenship is accompanied by appreciation of an individual’s capacity to contribute to society in local and in global contexts in more inclusive ways (Kiwani, 2007). It is for this reason that Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach was chosen as a lens through which to analyse the data in this paper, rather than other models of intercultural competence, of which there are many (Deardorff, 2009).

Within Nussbaum’s framework, intercultural capacity can be located within three capabilities: the capacity to critically examine oneself and one’s traditions; the capacity for affiliation as “living with and toward others” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 182); and the capacity to develop our narrative imagination to put ourselves in another’s place by freeing ourselves from our familiar perspectives in order to view the world through a different cultural viewpoint (Crosbie, 2014). Building a “sympathetic imagination” allows us to see cultural others “not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing

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