

**When your first year is your final year: Changing perceptions of practicum
through NESB pre-service teachers' eyes**

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Abstract

There are a growing number of international and national non-English speaking background (NESB) students studying teacher education in Australian universities. These students are hoping to gain their teacher registration and secure employment in Australian schools through undertaking the one-year Graduate Diploma program. For these students, their first year of teacher training is also their last, which presents unique challenges. In the present study, NESB student teachers' perceptions of practicum before and following school experiences were examined. The study's findings suggest that NESB student teachers, when faced with the complexities of teaching in a foreign country, are susceptible to experiencing a 'culture shock' during practicum. A differentiated mode of practicum delivery with greater support is required to assist these student teachers to manage the intricacies of teaching in an Australian classroom context.

Introduction

Practicum placements in schools are considered to be a significant component of pre-service teachers' education program (Touchon & Gwyn-Paquette, 2003). These experiences help student teachers develop a contextualised understanding of the intricacies of teaching and provide an opportunity to develop competencies across a range of areas including classroom management skills, the fundamentals of lesson planning, awareness of personal teaching style, and the ability to interact with students (Farrell, 2001; Richards & Crookes, 1988). According to Huling (1997), practicum experiences offer teacher candidates a place to "observe and work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings" (p.1). During practicum, student teachers apply theoretical knowledge and skills in a real classroom through direct and indirect teaching experiences (Farrell, 2001), including supervised and unsupervised teaching experiences.

Becoming accustomed to a new culture is challenging for national or international non-English speaking background (NESB) student teachers as they learn to accommodate language, communication and cultural differences during practicum. A major hurdle appears to be overcoming a mismatch between NESB student teachers' expectations of what teaching is going to be like and the realities of what they find in day-to-day classrooms. It is well documented that students from different cultures may have different approaches to education. Pre-service teachers tend to reproduce the kind of teaching that they have received and observed as students (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Richardson, 1996). They enter practicum with a set of beliefs and assumptions about how children learn, about what curriculum should contain, and about how teaching is approached. Classroom experiences as a pre-service teacher force students to critically examine their taken-for-granted, often deeply entrenched beliefs and to make adjustments to their beliefs accordingly (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). For some, facing the complexities and responsibilities associated

with the teaching role may instigate a form of ‘reality or culture shock’ in which ideas and beliefs about teaching are confronted.

The reintroduction of a one-year teacher training program exacerbates the problems faced by NESB student teachers. Whilst already feeling overwhelmed with the university’s requirements of their course work, these students also need to quickly learn about their roles and responsibilities for practicum placements within an abridged timeframe. Students in the one-year program are not only in the first year of their teacher training, they are also in their final year of training. When they leave university after one year, they are competing in the workplace with graduates from a four-year program. The abbreviated training time places great demands on student teachers in general, but particularly on NESB student teachers. Hood and Parker (1994) reported that students felt that university faculty and the education curriculum delivered to them did not recognise the cultural realities of minority students. Educators who promote the benefits of coming to universities in countries such as Australia have an obligation to support the students who take up the offer.

The present study examined the changing perceptions of NESB student teachers enrolled in a one-year teacher training program. The authors sought to understand the issues they faced as they prepared for practicum and how their needs changed upon reflecting on the practicum experience. The research will determine whether NESB student teachers’ beliefs and expectations of practicum are incompatible with the realities of schooling in Australia.

Data Collection

Upon obtaining a grant, the authors invited NESB students to participate in a series of workshops designed to help prepare them for their first practicum. Initially, 26 NESB students expressed interest in the workshops however only fifteen participated in the workshops. The participants, all female, mature age students enrolled in the one-year Graduate Diploma program were preparing for a four week practicum in which they were required to engage in teaching under the supervision of their host teacher. On the whole, students were from East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan and China although one was from Spain and another from Germany. Their time in Australia varied from several years to a few months before the school year began and therefore their knowledge and understanding of Australian culture varied considerably, as did their levels of English language proficiency. For example, one participant claimed that after sixteen years living in Australia she now could ‘think and dream in English’; others in the program were much less proficient in English.

The aim of the workshops was to reduce concerns of NESB pre-service teachers in relation to their upcoming practicum. To ensure that the objectives and content of the workshops were driven by the participants, small focus groups of approximately three to four participants were initially held in which they were asked to describe their major concerns about undertaking practicum. The focus groups, facilitated by the authors, were audio-taped to ensure accuracy in recording participants’ responses. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and core issues were identified based on the frequency of responses. From the results gathered, the authors developed and delivered a series of workshops to address their core concerns. Further supporting evidence related to their perceptions of practicum was also gathered anecdotally throughout the workshops.

Following practicum, participants were involved in one large focus group in which they were asked to share both the positive and negative aspects of their practicum experience and how it had altered their perceptions of teaching in an Australian context. These interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and the results coded as per the first block of interviews.

Initial Concerns in Preparing for Practicum

In the initial focus groups, participants identified some tentativeness about their lack of understanding of cultural differences between Australian schools and schools in their home country, managing student behavioural issues and cultural and language issues. Despite this, students indicated that they were feeling positive and indeed looking forward to their upcoming practicum experience. NESB student teachers acknowledged that they had inadequate knowledge of schooling practices in Australia. They sought information on how Australian schools typically operate, including information on teaching schedules, recess times, and additional role responsibilities such as attendance at school-related meetings and extracurricular activities. Hascher, Cocard, and Moser (2004) suggest that during practicum student teachers are in the 'survival stage' of their professional development as they readily try to adapt to their new environment. It is therefore reasonable to expect NESB student teachers will desire information about the school, their duties and responsibilities and school timetable because just getting through each day will be a major focus for them. Another concern identified included accommodating the individual learning needs of students while maintaining control over the whole class. Participants were anxious that they would not have the skills to 'do everything' all at once. They had some difficulty accepting that they would need to carry such responsibilities with what they felt was inadequate training and lack of sufficient information about schooling in Australia. From these initial focus groups, the authors determined that workshops would focus on day-to-day schooling responsibilities and behaviour management strategies as these were major concerns expressed by these pre-service teachers.

Exploring Perceptions in the Workshops

It became apparent from the discussions in the workshops that some NESB student teachers held rigid views of the schooling system where teachers 'clock' in and out of school and what activities were scheduled within school hours, in line with memories of their own childhood schooling experiences. Australian schools, on the other hand, have a more fluid and flexible workday, depending on the teacher's specific role, responsibilities and duties. During one workshop, an invited teacher with several years experience explained how she managed the diverse responsibilities and expectations associated with teaching, particularly unpredictable and unplanned events (e.g., administrative meetings, dealing with student issues, meetings with parents). She recommended that the student teachers adopt a flexible approach to planning teaching periods, to recognise that unscheduled events regularly occur, and to be prepared to do a significant amount of paper work and planning outside of school hours. NESB students described how this workshop activity helped to normalise unscheduled events and working outside of school hours for them. They explained that they understood that schooling in Australia would be different in some ways from what they expected, however, the experienced teacher provided them a better understanding of these differences.

NESB student teachers also expressed feeling concerned about managing students with varying learning needs or behavioural issues and maintaining classroom control and therefore

the workshop facilitators developed a number of case studies designed to help these student teachers think about the types of student issues or problems they might encounter in Australian schools. For example, in one situation, participants were asked to consider what they would do if a small group of girls were chatting at the back of the room during a lesson. The overall consensus was that chatting in school was a demonstration of a lack of discipline and respect for the teacher. NESB student teachers stated that they would use discipline strategies such as immediate detention, offering bribes, stern words and removing privileges. When questioned about their discipline approaches, they indicated that they simply recalled strategies that they had seen modelled to them throughout their own educational experiences overseas. These findings confirmed that student teachers show a strong tendency to approach teacher related activities in similar ways to the teachers that they had experienced when they were pupils; supporting literature that suggests that pre-service teachers tend to reproduce the kind of teaching that they have received and observed (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). The facilitators of the workshop had some difficulty conveying to the student teachers that there were many times during a school day where students would be able to talk and for a variety of reasons; some NESB student teachers were not convinced that such behaviours were acceptable.

Workshop facilitators determined that the NESB student teachers did not employ critical thinking in relation to the case studies described in the workshops. Students tended to use one strategy to resolve most issues, failing to take into consideration the underlying reasons for pupils' so-called misbehaviour and few considered devising a contingency plan if their resolution proved unsuccessful. Students were asked to explain what they understood about a given situation, what they would need to know about the situation in order to make an informed decision, which personnel they would consult to gain additional information about the problem and what possible actions they could take to manage the situation. Some of the pre-service teachers found it difficult to accept that because classroom practice is context-specific there are no proven steps that a teacher can implement that will readily resolve all student issues. Furthermore, since the nature and complexity of situations are often unknown beforehand, teachers must interpret situations as they arise, consider a range of general classroom principles, make prompt decisions, and then evaluate the outcomes of their decisions (Deng, 2004). Interestingly, despite indicating that classroom control was a concern for them in preparing for practicum, few participants had undertaken the elective unit 'behaviour management' which provides students with knowledge of and strategies to use for a range of behavioural difficulties demonstrated by Australian students. Because behaviour management and developing effective classroom management strategies are paramount to successful learning and teaching, the authors would suggest that behaviour management should be a core unit in their course of study.

It is difficult to say if some of the NESB students were hampered in going through the case studies by their limited knowledge of Australian school culture, Australian culture in general or by their own English language proficiency. The students who attended the workshops were keen to attend and willing to learn as much as they could about their upcoming practicum. Since these students have a limited time to receive training and become teachers, it is important that further research is gathered from the one-year education cohort to identify their particular learning needs. It is essential that education programs place a greater emphasis on helping student teachers to become more aware of cultural differences in teaching and how these differences may shape their perceptions of the teaching role and student learning.

For one workshop, the pre-service teachers were asked to prepare a lesson on a topic area they might be asked to teach during practicum that took into consideration potential differences in students' learning. Lesson plans were critically reviewed in small groups with the assistance of the workshop facilitators. It was observed that overall, participants relied on transmissive approaches to teaching where the teacher stands at the front of the class and students write down the information from the blackboard. Such approaches have long been considered to encourage surface learning (Biggs, 2003). These student teachers had difficulty articulating and evaluating students' learning objectives, and had insufficient material to meet the lesson time requirements. Furthermore, they had not considered ways in which they could deliver the lesson material so that it captured Australian students' attention or catered for students' different learning needs. Upon receiving critical feedback, participants revised their original lesson plans to include more structured activities of varying degrees of difficulty and duration to cater for student diversity. Participants also began to relate the subject matter to their students' interests and hobbies, making the lessons more relevant and meaningful for their pupils. This workshop activity demonstrated that student teachers need more time and further practice to learn the necessary skills to develop effective lessons and curriculum.

Perceptions Post-Practicum

The workshop facilitators observed that prior to practicum it was difficult for NESB student teachers to identify their major support needs as they could only 'imagine' the problems they would confront. For NESB student teachers, practicum provided them with a 'reality check' and a much deeper level of understanding of the aspects of teaching they would need to improve. The majority of participants acknowledged that their level of English proficiency proved to be a greater barrier during practicum than they had originally thought. Some NESB student teachers admitted that they sometimes misconstrued or failed to understand what was requested of them by their host teacher, making it hard to meet the teacher's expectations. This is evident in the following written reflection from one NESB pre-service teacher:

Sometimes the supervising teachers set an unrealistic high standard on the NESB student teachers (English level or some other areas). Not every good teacher can teach well in the very beginning. NESB student teachers need room and space and grace to grow in their teaching practicum. If one of the goals of education is to nurture students to have healthier personalities and characters, every teacher should first have the right to be treated with equity, support and inspiration to excel in their personal growth as an educator. Crushing a NESB student teacher in their practicum will certainly crush that person's spirit. Even if this person eventually becomes a teacher, has the person learned to treat other people with grace and kindness from his/her past experience?

Other participants suggested that their relationship with their supervising teacher hindered their practicum experience. For instance, one student teacher indicated that she felt like a burden to her teacher:

"I wanted to know how I was progressing and get feedback. I arranged times to speak with my host teacher, but she'd kept cancelling meetings at the last minute because she said she was so busy."

Another student teacher felt undermined by her young host teacher in front of her pupils.

"There was friction present. I was the supervising teacher's first practicum student. The supervising teacher had been teaching for 3 years. I expected a more experienced teacher. The supervising teacher was younger than me. She wasn't professional enough. The teacher ate her breakfast or lunch at a table when I was teaching my lesson. She interrupted me when I was talking to students, trying to explain something to students. In my country people should respect older people."

Another student indicated that she automatically felt disadvantaged with her students because her host teacher introduced her to the students using her first name:

“She should have called me Miss X, that way my students would’ve given me respect. Her students call her Mrs Y.”

This pre-service teacher identifies an imbalance in power between her and her host teacher that seems to be aggravated by being addressed by her first name rather than being addressed in a professional manner (as the host teacher was addressed by her students). Participants also noted differences between schooling in Australia and their country of origin. For instance:

“In my country, students tend to be more disciplined. Straight backs. They don’t call out in class. The thing in China or even Asia, teachers don’t really consider about the students’ opinions, they don’t like to be challenged by the students. You are the boss basically. There is only one correct answer and the teacher has the one correct answer, so we have to follow the teacher.”

These comments are similar to those expressed by participants in the workshops in relation to their perceptions of misbehaviour in the classroom. For some, students were meant to be quiet and studious during class time when, in reality, this was not how they found students in schools.

A few pre-service teachers however, reported minimal differences between schooling in Australia and schooling in their home country:

“In Germany, we don’t have private schools because you don’t have to pay school fees, we don’t have uniforms, that kind of thing. The teaching itself is quite similar, maybe even more like challenge the students to think for themselves, even more than here, about discussion and making up their own interpretation about things. Very similar I guess.”

It would seem that because there is a general familiarity between schooling cultures in Germany and Australia (perhaps a Euro-centric similarity) the gap between the two educational practices was minimal, whereas, with the students from East Asian countries, greater differences were noted. Taking into consideration that the majority of student teachers who volunteered to be involved in the professional development workshops were from an Asian background, it could be concluded that these pre-service teachers are more susceptible to experiencing a culture shock as they commence teaching in Australian schools.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the issues that confront NESB student teachers as they prepared for practicum and how their needs changed upon reflecting on the practicum experience. Participants in this study were enrolled in a one-year education program and therefore their first year of teaching was also their last, limiting the time available to learn important teaching skills and knowledge of Australian school culture prior to embarking on practicum.

The present study found that before they engaged in practicum most of the NESB student teachers felt relatively confident about the upcoming practicum experience, although with some reservations. Their main source of concern related to obtaining information about their host school, the classes they were teaching and their daily timetabling schedule. They

considered that they could successfully develop lesson plans because they had a sufficient grasp of subject knowledge. However, in developing lesson plans they did not consider how they would accommodate a range of student learning styles and developmental levels. They also found it difficult to create imaginative lessons that would capture students' attention and considered that they could learn a set of step-by-step strategies to manage most student problems.

The findings seem to suggest that NESB student teachers' positive perceptions of practicum were related to a somewhat simplistic view of teaching. They seemed unaware of how their teaching beliefs, formed in their country of origin, were misaligned with teaching in an Australian context. In fact, practicum experience instigated a deeper awareness of the complexities of teaching and a more sophisticated understanding of the teaching knowledge and skills they lacked, which actually reduced their confidence.

NESB student teachers realised that they needed to learn more about Australian school culture and teaching practices. Australian universities can better support NESB student teachers enrolled in the one-year education training program by offering these students a differentiated mode of delivery for practicum. For example, universities could arrange for NESB student teachers with limited or no schooling experience in Australia to observe a range of classes, preferably in a variety of schools, prior to engaging in a four-week practicum (Cruikshank, 2004). These students would benefit from increased hands-on experiences of learning and teaching within an Australian context. Housego (1990) suggested that students would benefit from a developmental approach to practicum where they begin with frequent classroom observations, then half-days of working with individuals, then small groups of students before progressing to teach the entire class. Such a program would allow NESB students to become familiar with the cultural and linguistic nuances of the classroom and allow them to gain a better understanding of their roles as teachers.

Practicum experiences are also dependent upon a competent host (or supervising) teacher who is willing to provide support and advice (professional, emotional or both) and organised professional development (Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, & Watters, 2001). Host teachers should have sufficient experience and teaching expertise so that they can provide the student teacher with information, ideas, assistance and support. Furthermore, they should adopt a collaborative co-thinking relationship, and maintain a balance sharing personal knowledge of good teaching and encouraging the pre-service teachers' construction of his or her own views about teaching (Ginns et al., 2001). Some participants in the current study suggested that their host teacher failed to provide the support and guidance they required. Indeed, some host teachers appeared to destroy rather than build confidence; making NESB student teachers feel powerless in their relationship with their host teacher. Touchon and Gwyn-Paquette (2003) proposed that it is difficult for student teachers to take a risk to try new approaches during practicum under the observation of their host teacher particularly when they have not seen the approach to teaching modelled and if they perceive that there is little support for them to do so.

A possible way to build NESB student teachers' confidence in communicating with their host teacher is to offer them assertiveness communication training so that they feel more empowered to negotiate with their host teacher a supervision plan which includes time to critically reflect on their teaching. Schools also need to ensure that NESB student teachers are assigned experienced teachers who are sensitive to their specific support needs. It is therefore desirable that all teachers undergo mentor training prior to becoming a host teacher.

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Furthermore, host teachers need to be given adequate time to prepare for the supervisory experience and a reduced workload during the practicum period; enabling them to spend sufficient time supervising and supporting the student teacher.

The present study examined only NESB student teachers' perceptions of practicum, as data was not collected from their host teacher. Future research examining the host teachers' perceptions of their student teachers and the practicum experience in the one-year program and NESB pre-service teachers is warranted in order to shed further light on how these relationships can be strengthened. Additionally, due to the small sample size, and the omission of males in the study, the findings cannot be generalised to all NESB students preparing for practicum. Despite these limitations it was evident from the findings from this study that a differentiated mode of practicum delivery with greater support is required to assist these students to manage the intricacies of teaching in an Australian classroom context. The participants in this project were largely unaware of the difficulties they would face in beginning teaching in Australia; however, they were committed to becoming good teachers. It is therefore incumbent on universities offering a one-year teacher education program to NESB students to more fully support them.

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