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Developing intercultural teachers: The Mumbai Global Experience Project

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ABSTRACT

Interculturalism is a major theme that needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects in teacher education courses. Moreover, the practicum is an area where there needs to be more attention given to developing the attributes of an intercultural teacher.

In 2008 I took a group of thirteen teacher education students on a three-week practicum to Mumbai, India. This paper reports on that project with a research focus on the impact the international teaching experience had on developing understandings of and practice in the teaching attributes of an intercultural teacher. The research question for the project was: In what ways has the Mumbai Global Experience enabled the development of attributes of an intercultural teacher?

Students were interviewed by a research assistant before, during and after the practicum.

About halfway through the practicum the terrorist attack on Mumbai occurred. This had a significant impact on the practicum and is reported in the paper.

BACKGROUND

Internationalisation is a key value within Deakin University. The School of Education promotes this value through its research and teaching in a number of ways. One way is to encourage students to undertake a Global Experience Project (GEP), a teaching practicum program for students enrolled in primary and secondary teacher education courses. It offers students a diverse range of international and intercultural experiences in educational settings beyond Victoria and Australia.

Our partner in India was Kangaroo Kids Education Ltd. (KKEL), a Mumbai based private school franchise of some 60 primary, secondary and pre-schools located throughout India. The schools have an English language based curriculum. The founding Director of the schools Ms Lina Asha did her teaching education degree at Deakin University and chose an activity based, 'Australian style' curriculum and hence the use of the Kangaroo badge. I had been on the KKEL Advisory Board for some years and therefore chose their schools to be the setting for the Mumbai GEP in 2008. We had often discussed the possibilities of Australian teacher education students doing a practicum in their schools and they had always been very positive about the prospects. They were delighted to see this project come to fruition and could not have been more supportive. The Deakin students were placed in four KKEL schools.

An invitation to participate in the Mumbai GEP went to all teacher education students. Thirteen student teachers chose to take part in the project. I was the only Deakin University academic accompanying them (my wife accompanied me). Students were advised that they would begin teaching on November 15 and that the last day of teaching would be December 5; they made their own travel arrangements around those dates. They paid for their own airfares, visas and vaccinations; accommodation and meals in Mumbai was organised by the school with host families.

Several pre-departure meetings were organised at the university and a number of dinners were held at an Indian restaurant. Students were invited to bring their parents, friends and partners. The dinners were well attended and the students particularly enjoyed meeting each other. The meetings were information sessions with plenty of questions and answers and suggestions. A folder of selected readings, Bollywood films and images of the Mumbai schools was made available to students as pre-departure reference material. A major focus of the meetings was to develop trust – it was important for the students to develop trust in me and in each other and

feel confident that I knew the ‘unknown’ environment in which they would be working. My Indian background and familiarity with the field of practicum was a significant advantage in building trust.

The particular focus for the Mumbai GEP was the intercultural teacher. The questions discussed with the student teachers were: How can you represent yourself through your professional portfolio as an intercultural teacher? What are the attributes of an intercultural teacher?

METHOD

The research focus in the Mumbai GEP was to explore a range of attributes that characterise teachers who are able to work effectively across cultural boundaries. What would be the teaching attributes of ‘an intercultural teacher’?

Accordingly, the research question for this project was: In what ways has the Mumbai Global Experience enabled you to develop attributes of an intercultural teacher?

Of the thirteen students who chose to do the Mumbai Global Experience Project three were males and ten females. A research assistant was employed, not previously known to the students, to conduct a series of interviews with the students before they left for Mumbai (in person) while they were in Mumbai (via email) and when they returned, either via email or in person.

Students were asked a series of questions as follows:

Why did you choose to do the Mumbai GEP?

Did you get what you expected to get from the Mumbai GEP?

How do you rate yourself as a ‘intercultural teacher’?

Please be as specific as possible in describing your teaching attributes that you would call ‘intercultural teaching attributes’?

Please comment on how the Mumbai GEP enabled you to develop the attributes of an intercultural teacher?

Care was taken not to make the research interviews appear much like an assignment, so the research questions were not discussed with students. The interviews were left entirely to the research assistant. Students were most cooperative and expressed an interest in reading the research report.

LEARNING THROUGH AN INTERNATIONAL PRACTICUM

As Funmi (2004) did, I take up Giroux’s (1992 quoted in Funmi, 2004, p167) notion of ‘border-crossing’ as the reflective theme for my own pedagogy in teacher education and my position as a migrant scholar passionately committed to intercultural education. I spent my first twenty-three years in India where I did an undergraduate degree, a teacher education degree and teaching experience in schools in Kolkata. Throughout my teaching in Australia (since 1969), intercultural education has been high on my agenda. I have consistently experienced the lack of it in all levels of education. Indeed, I welcome the initiatives of the current Federal Government to promote the learning of languages in schools and I have been involved in several projects involving intercultural learning in my tertiary teaching (Nicholson, and Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Johnson, and Nicholson, 2006).

I agree with Coulby (2006, p.246) who states that interculturalism is not a subject that can be given timetable time alongside all the others, nor is it appropriate to one phase of education only. Interculturalism is a theme, probably the major theme that needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects. If education is not intercultural, it is probably not education, but rather the inculcation of nationalist or religious fundamentalism.

My motivation to organise the Mumbai GEP started with a critique on a unit I taught believing that it was inadequate to look at the European enlightenment period as informing us of our understandings of childhood and adolescence; we needed to examine the ‘Indian enlightenment period’, for example (Johnson, 2006). The paper concluded with a recommendation for ‘a pedagogy of respect’ which reflected the following features: being respectful (particularly to the original owners of the land); inclusivity, allowing all students a welcoming

gateway where they could see evidence of intercultural approaches to learning and teaching expressed through teaching methods and resources; promoting discussion and debate; valuing the skill of listening; not being ageist – valuing age and experience; promoting reflectivity – valuing serenity and contemplation; respecting the whole person – body mind and spirit and catering for the health and well being of all three domains; promoting a holistic appreciation of the environment and not being culturally hierarchical (Johnson, 2006). Undergraduate teacher education students were interested in discussing how they could represent themselves as ‘intercultural teachers’. It was anticipated that teaching in Mumbai would be an appropriate context within which to focus on such attributes.

There are several examples in the literature of the successes of teaching practicums where students interacted with children from different cultures and how that was an effective means of improving teachers’ intercultural sensitivity and teaching effectiveness (Bell, 2000; Hill, Thomas & Coté □ □ □). Research in the area also suggests that such experiences may serve to confirm racist or stereotypical perceptions (Haberman & Post, 1992). The Mumbai GEP being an optional practicum possibly excluded those with predispositions to racism or negative stereotypes. It was however, a fully credited as a practicum in lieu of a local, school based practicum. Students self-selected and no one who applied was disallowed. The pre-departure question about their reason for choosing the Mumbai practicum were positive and represented a willingness to learn in a challenging cultural setting as represented in this sample of their responses:

I've always wanted to teach other cultures and so I thought it was a perfect opportunity to go, with Uni..... I chose India because I wanted to be out of my own depth, to be put in the middle of things and have to sort it out.... I've copped a bit of flack from some of my (Anglo) friends about going to India – they say “Why would you want to go there? They're all dirty!”...Because I'm going to be teaching in a very Anglo school next year I really want to expose them to different cultures, that's who I am and so that's how I'll teach. ...I think the thing for me will be to try and make myself comfortable with a new scenario, because I like my life the way it's structured and organised, and that doesn't seem to be the case in India, so because everything is so different - I don't know what the normal things are – so putting myself in that scenario will be challenging.

One of my colleagues taking a GEP to Vanuatu stated that his most significant finding was that over 70% of participants believed the GEP in Vanuatu influenced their later ‘educational experiences’. However, the ‘unfortunate ambiguity of this item makes it difficult to extrapolate just what these educational experiences might be’ (Prior, 2006). I learnt from that comment and made the focus the Mumbai GEP the ‘teaching attributes of an intercultural teacher’. Students were encouraged to represent themselves as global teachers in their professional portfolio, a compilation of expressions of the teaching attributes they claim to possess at the end of their teacher education degree.

My understanding of an intercultural teacher is one who is able to negotiate between cultures rather than show that there is more than one culture. They need to enable students to access a range of cultures including each others’. La Roux puts it as the ability to think, feel and also to act in ways that acknowledge, respect and also build ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity (Le Roux, 2002 p.41).

Le Roux (2002) proposes that such cultural diversity presents a tremendous challenge to teachers and Stoer & Cortesao (2002) suggest that what society needs is for mono-cultural teachers to become transformed into what I call intercultural teachers in order to develop the capacity to cross cultural borders and teach effectively in increasingly heterogeneous schools.

Before we left, the Mumbai GEP students were clear and enthusiastic with regards to developing teaching attributes that would enable them to teach across borders. This is a sample of what they said:

I want to be that notion of a global teacher. I've always wanted to teach other cultures and so I thought it was a perfect opportunity to go...
I chose India because I wanted to be out of my own depth, to be put in the middle of things and have to sort it out.
I would like to teach overseas, I wouldn't like to teach exclusively in Australia. I'd like to teach in South America.

I think I am a global teacher - it's all or nothing. You either are or you aren't. To what level I am I don't know ... I think you have to have passion for other people, you have to have interaction with other cultures (to your own), open-minded - if you love people then you're open-minded.

There have been a number of advocates for the need for teacher education courses to prepare teachers to teach with a global perspective and have the attributes to teach across national and cultural boundaries (Lynch 1992; Steiner 1996; Mahon 2006; Schwille & Dembele 2007). Tierney identifies a global teacher as a cultural pedagogue with the ability to support the development of culturally relevant schools that...provide educational self-determination, honor and respect for the student's home culture' (2006 p.78). We could sometimes be led to believe that good teachers are global teachers, however Tierney suggests that the global teacher is additionally able to '...operate with knowledge of individual student's lives, of local history and economy, and of socio-cultural traditions and practices' (Tierney 2006 p.79). Furthermore, the Curriculum Corporation Australia, recognises '... that ethnocentric attitudes and stereotyping have serious negative consequences, and that classroom practice needs to counteract them...' The global teacher has '... a philosophical grasp of the interconnectedness of issues of development, peace, cultural diversity, human rights and environmental sustainability,...[promotes] the values of tolerance, equality, diversity an openness; receptivity to and empathy towards different cultures' (2002 p.15).

Dooly and Villanueva's (2006) project influenced me in planning the Mumbai GEP . Their project was designed to promote intercultural awareness of future teachers, set up in response to the European Union's recognition of the need for promoting social and political change through education. They recognised that students needed to be made aware of their own and others' cultures in order to interpret and understand others. This they believed was more than just 'intercultural communicative competence', and focused on combining theory with teaching practice in a school in a partner country foreign to the teacher trainees. 'It was felt that teacher trainees should learn from others – from other trainees in other cultures – and they should also learn from themselves – from the empirical knowledge drawn from living and teaching in another culture' (Dooly & Villanueva 2006 p.227). While the results were positive in the development of the teacher trainees' intercultural sensitivity, there was still a gap between the development of the 'teacher' and the implementation of interculturally competent practices in the classroom. The teacher trainees identified important skills such as knowledge of different cultures, open-mindedness and knowing another language as outcomes of the pilot program, however, only a small number of participants '...mentioned the importance this would have for their future students by exposing them to different cultures and languages.' (Dooly & Villanueva 2006 p.231)

Having completed their teaching practicum in Mumbai, this is what the Mumbai GEP students had to say about the attributes of a global teacher (intercultural teacher):

I think I am a global teacher - it's all or nothing. You either are or you aren't. To what level I am I don't know ...

passion for other people, you have to have interaction with other cultures...

Looking forward to difference... whether it's good or bad, I'll learn from it and just go with it...

open-minded - Going to India definitely helped to develop these attributes...

I think global teaching involves tolerance, open-mindedness, respect for different cultures, a global mindset – even if I was teaching in my local setting encouraging the students to look outside the square and not focus just on what's happening down the street but also what happens overseas...

Open-mindedness... being able to take a step back from yourself ... look at yourself objectively... from yourself towards everything around you; and to not pass judgement straight away, but at the same time get all those external factors; cultural, religious, historical ... without having it broken down in that process...

you need to be a realist and an optimist at the same time...

I think you have to be more on-your-toes and cater to the students as individuals, rather than provide something that will suit them all...

I've learnt cultural respect – respect for people that have differences which don't sit well in your (my) culture.

The emphasis that the local community places on education and how education is valued within a culture has a severe impact on the teaching methodologies implemented and teaching attributes possessed by teachers.

One thing I have learnt from being here so far is patience.

It was important to pause, think, observe carefully the nuances of conversations and interactions to fully understand what was meant, not just what was said. Particularly since 'no' seemed to not be a part of their vocabulary.

I also learnt to double and triple check everything, and never too much in advance. I believed that little would happen until I actually saw it happen. Preparation was a nightmare and flexibility the key for us...

In summary, the students nominate the following as attributes of an intercultural teacher:

- passion for other people
- ability to interact with other cultures
- open-minded - being able to step outside yourself - look outside the square
- tolerance
- respect for other cultures
- the ability to be a realist and optimist at the same time
- an understanding of others' values
- patience
- flexibility

It is acknowledged that communication skills are important in intercultural teaching but I found that the specific point that DuPraw and Axner (1997) and Amobi (2004, p170) make relating to cultural boundaries being delineated by differences in communication style (among other things) as being very helpful in the discussion about intercultural communication. It is important to acknowledge and recognise differences in communication styles. Often the students would observe chaos when they were observing different styles of communication. The talking over, raising of voices, negotiating loudly in groups, being animated was seen as confusion by the Australian students – sometimes it was – often it was not. These cultural nuances in communication needed to be identified, observed again, discussed and contextualised for the student teachers – a process that takes time. However, awareness of different styles in communication is an important attribute for the intercultural teacher. The following comments reflect confusion that may be better understood when seen through the lens of communication styles:

... it seems to me that the school is suffering from a chronic case of miscommunication. The right hand never seems to know what the left is doing, not only in relation to us but just about everything that I have seen. The blame for this I believe is an unwillingness for people to assume overall control and with it overall responsibility.

The students were very understanding and we had some great laughs at the way we sometimes spoke, but I realise that this may not always happen and therefore there is a need to be sensitive to students coming from other cultures that they may not have the confidence to ask when they don't understand, or become frustrated if I don't understand them. To me it is very important to realise that I need to remain open and friendly in teaching all students.

Although I did realise that although we both spoke English, accents could be difficult to always understand what each other was saying, so I had to ensure I often let the students know that accents can make understanding difficult, therefore they needed to realise that I may also not always understand them and ask them to repeat their question.

I expected different things - I said 'Please don't talk over me, there's language barriers here...you have really great points to make and if you scream out I can't hear what you're saying. And likewise, if you can't understand me then ask me to slow down.' And they were putting up their hand by the end of it...

The school seems to be very disorganised compared to home...

The frustration expressed was very much a summary of the attributes of an intercultural teacher expressed before - an intercultural teacher needs to understand and be able to function within the cultural context in which they are working with flexibility, patience and respect. The Australian students on practicum understood that it

was not their brief to change the system within which they worked but to understand it and be able to identify the cultural nuances and most importantly, to negotiate a path for themselves within that context.

A debriefing meeting was held a few weeks after all students had returned home. It was held in one of the student's home and around the context of sharing pictures, videos and stories. The research assistant for the project also had email discussions with the students focussing what they had learned in relation to the attributes of an intercultural teacher. Several of the students have since expressed the desire to revisit India and four students are negotiating to do further teaching there. Two students are interested in other international practicums.

HOST FAMILIES/TEACHERS/STUDENT TEACHERS

As mentioned earlier, this was a highly anticipated project. The Kangaroo Kids Inc. organisation was eager to host such a project and was consistent – staff did everything they could do to make the students welcome – a lavish welcoming ceremony, a dinner party, a gift, transport, lunches and the host family arrangements. The host families with whom the students stayed were parents of students who attended the school. In most cases they were driven to and from. Probably, the best feature of the practicum for most students was their host family. They enjoyed living with an Indian family and being part of that family. Probably the greatest feature of Indian culture is 'the family'. The students had the opportunity to experience the Indian family and their traditional hospitality. This is a sample of what they had to say:

My host family was fantastic – it was such a great experience living with a family. When they took me to a café I saw some other westerners and I felt so privileged to be sitting there with the locals, instead of chatting about a western view of India. If you were staying in a hotel you would be so isolated from the real India - you might as well be somewhere else. I did all the things locals would do.... My host family certainly had different views on things to me but I just thought 'so what, you're Indian, I'm Australian - awesome!

I was worried about the accommodation – I thought I'd be sharing with the children – It's only a two bedroom apartment – but the children were moved to share with the parents and I had a room to myself with a double bed.

My host family wanted me to have time on my own away from the adoring children and dogs so they bought me a television so I could shut my door and watch television on my own.

The teachers were also generous and accommodating but I saw that 'colonial thing' still well and truly alive. They deferred to the student teachers. This is a sample of how the students interpreted that:

I felt the teachers were intimidated by us being there - they didn't seem confident in themselves. The curriculum is really structured. The teachers said I could put my own spin on it, but when I did, they wanted the set worksheet to be done as well, even though the content was the same. - the teaching staff can be confused about what is happening

The children are more likely to call out and be disruptive and the teachers do not seem to worry about that much.

It has most certainly been a cultural experience even just in this short time, but also a cultural clash. The clash is more on the school organisation front and the level of organisation that we take for granted in Australian schools mixed with Indian cultural welcoming and treating us as if we're royalty. In all the pampering however, it means we're told nothing except for the reoccurring phrase 'don't worry'.

THE TERRORIST ATTACK ON MUMBAI NOVEMBER 26, 2008

The hospitality and care of the whole community enabled the students to see through the trauma of the terrorist attacks. Nine students returned home soon after the incident and four stayed to the end of the practicum.

The following is taken from the diary of a student and quoted at length because I felt it represented the sensitive response the students had to that traumatic event.

*Heroes die. Only when we forget.
All of last week, our city was glued to the TV screen.*

We fed greedily on every detail... the firearms the terrorists had, the boats they came in, the biryani they gorged on...

We know what Major Unnikrishnan's father looks like or how ATS Chief Karkare's shoddy bulletproof vest let him down.

We even know the names of many officers, havildars, commandos and hotel staff who fell in the line of duty. Well, let's recall some of those names here. Karkare, Rajan, Omble, Gajraj, Sandip, Shinde... The cruel truth is that by next week most of us will be watching the resumed India-England Test series... Because unfortunately, that's how life is. The most passionate part of us exhausts itself even before we begin to acknowledge it ourselves. And that's when the Karkares, the Ombles, the Shindes and all those gutsy men and women at CST and Taj and Trident and Nariman House actually die. Not by bullets, but by amnesia.

Not in the hearts and minds of their bereaved families, but in the collective memory of this lovely city of ours. And in the conscience of a society numb and besieged with disasters ever so often.

Should we allow them to be forgotten again?

It is a very surreal experience to receive calls in the dead of night asking if you are still alive. I had gone to sleep early on the night of November 26th and the first I knew something was wrong was a message from fellow Deakin student Sarah. "School is cancelled. Stay Safe." I wondered to myself what was possibly happening. Then my sister called me and filled me in.

My first thought was that this was a tragedy and I hoped all my new found friends were safe. My second thought was, I will not go home because of this. In the morning my host family gathered round the television screen watching the siege unfold. Words like war zone, attack, terrorists exploded across the screen - a stark contrast to the colourful lightness of the Bollywood film I'd watched on the same TV the night before. My host family glared at me with crooked smiles and worried eyes. In a country which prides itself on its hospitality - where guests are treated like Gods and nothing is ever too much trouble, this was a difficult pill to swallow. So we did what everyone does in a crisis...we sat together in the living room, united in the silence by our shared humanity. I caught my host family's eyes glancing across to gauge my reaction from time to time. Even then when their city was literally burning, their primary concern was how to be a good host.

We had been at the Gateway of India three days before. We had snuck into the Taj to use the bathroom. We had photographed ourselves outside its beautiful marble walls. Later we would learn that the terrorists were already there then...

School was cancelled for the rest of the week. I was advised to lay low while the crisis subsided. I spoke to some of the other Deakin students. Reactions seemed mixed - scared, shocked, numb, homesick. Deakin University was very supportive - contacting my family and organising evacuation if we so wished but with my placement only half way through I was not ready to leave. I was so immersed in school life. I had made friends there. I had formed relationships with my students and colleagues. People were depending on me for concert preparation. I could not leave.

On the first day back at school the students had half hour counselling sessions in their year groups. Children were asked to define terrorism and terrorists. Mostly their definitions reflected their parents' political persuasions or what they had seen on the news. It took a great deal of time to explain to them that terrorists are not always Muslim and not always Pakistani. Many of the students had burning questions that the teacher in me really wanted to explore. This was not welcome and the session was more of a quick lesson in 'how to beat terrorism practically'. One child was sent to the back of the room for asking if terrorists are always evil considering that the Indian Freedom Fighters were called "terrorists" by the British. Similarly reprimanded was a student who suggested the attacks could have been prevented if politicians provided the city with greater security. The students were told that security is not up to the government but the individual: "Check for bombs and unfamiliar faces", "Don't be scared for then they win", "Live your normal everyday existence". Of course such messages were seemingly contradicted by the mass exodus of their Australian teachers. The Billabong students were very keen to hear my reaction to the crisis. They would ask me if I felt scared and if I was angry about "the white people that died". This made me even more determined to stay in Mumbai for the duration.

Without disrespecting the other students who left for their own legitimate reasons, to me evacuation meant confirming the precious white person stereotype. Speaking to some of the students upon their return it was clear for some the decision was not one that sat easy. I received many emails over the

next few days from the returned Deakin students asking me what I was doing and how everyone was as they tried to soak up the experience vicariously. It must have been more shocking for them, being plucked out of a war zone to be returned to a sleepy Melbournian suburb. I am so glad that I stayed. My work at Billabong meant something. It was never going to be a mere touristic exercise for me. It genuinely meant something to the students, teachers and my host family that I stayed. It felt like staying was a way for me to say to my new friends, "We're in this together, I support you, we have more similarities than differences, the terrorists will not defeat a collective "us". And, as is always the case with people emerging out of crisis, I saw the best and worst of Mumbai and its citizens. I experienced the eerie emptiness of the streets as people feared for their lives and the resilience shortly after when the city came together in healing and discussion. Is it not also what being a global teacher is all about – adaptation and flexibility? I did not know what the next day would bring in Mumbai but I knew without a doubt I wanted to be there and to be a part of it.

The students coped extraordinarily well. They did not panic in spite of the gruesome 'in-your-face' television coverage and the anxiety of parents back in Australia. One of the students made a deal with her father – she would return as soon as possible only if he returned to India with her in the next two years. Deakin University did all it could to support the students.

Hill and Thomas (2005) wrote about the 'valuable but unintended and serendipitous outcomes' of their intensive in-country Indonesian language programme in Bali; that will be the focus of my next paper on the Mumbai practicum. The terrorist attack and the host of cultural experiences contributed significantly to the unintended outcomes which was so much part of this Mumbai practicum experience.

CONCLUSION

The Mumbai Global Experience Project showed that teacher education students may learn a great deal from having teaching practicum in a different cultural setting to their own. However, several qualifiers that need to be made following that statement. Students need to be prepared before they embark on such a project and there needs to be a purposeful focus for the project, such as investigating the notion of intercultural teaching and reflecting on the attributes of an intercultural teacher. The GEP should not just be an excursion with the vague purpose of experiencing another culture. The Mumbai GEP students will each develop a section of their professional teaching portfolio that highlights their claim of being an intercultural teacher.

If students could locate their international practicum in a broader faculty-based focus on intercultural education, it would be highly advantageous. I believe there is a great deal of scope to develop opportunities for such links even further in our faculty. In a true intercultural agenda, there should be an exchange of opportunities for the Mumbai teachers to work in our faculty and in our partnership schools. However, there needs to be a shared commitment to internationalism at the level suggested by Colby (2006), referred to earlier in this paper to make it a major theme that informs the teaching and learning of all subjects. As part of this initiative, we need to extend our work to diverse cultural communities in Melbourne and include schools in these partnerships.

The Mumbai Global Experience Project with its focus on intercultural teaching should be seen as just one initiative in an agenda to enable teachers to develop as global citizens with intercultural teaching attributes. I will take the opportunity to follow the Mumbai GEP student teachers on their professional journey and attempt to monitor how they may develop their intercultural teaching attributes.

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