

## INTERCULTURAL TEACHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS ON AN INTERNATIONAL PRACTICUM

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### Abstract

Interest is growing in the potential of international intercultural teaching practicums to connect students to international dimensions of education and to productively disturb the conceptions of teaching, diversity and culture that some pre-service teachers bring with them into their teaching. This paper reports on an international teaching practicum, wherein a cohort of pre-service students from Australia undertakes a three week practicum in schools and community-based settings in Johannesburg, South Africa. The practicum is part of an ongoing international project, which is now in its fourth year. It is supported by partnerships between universities in Australia and South Africa, and ongoing relationships with schools and NGOs in the host country. Using narrative-based inquiry methods, the authors inquire into the experiences of three cohorts of pre-service teachers who undertook the practicum from 2009-2011. They find that the pre-service teachers' experiences of this practicum in a developing country are usually positive, notwithstanding, or perhaps even because of, the ways in which the students have to grapple in deeply collegial ways with ethical dilemmas and other challenges.

### Introduction

Research into teacher education across the world notes that pre-service teachers typically bring deeply ingrained conceptions of teaching and learning and education into their teacher education studies (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Grossman, 1991). Despite a range of innovations in teacher education over the last thirty years, research continues to observe how pre-service teachers' pre-existing conceptions strongly mediate their learning journey toward the teaching profession (e.g., Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009). Whereas institutional factors within universities (such as standardised assessment regimes), as well as some schools, curriculums and government policy can seem to validate pre-service teachers' first conceptions of teaching (cf. Florio-Ruane, 2001; van de Ven, 2011), teacher education needs to show that it can have some impact on existing beliefs and attitudes. It can do this by building on or productively disturbing some of these beliefs and attitudes.

Recently, attention has been re-focused on the practicum and its potential for connecting with, productively disturbing, or merely reinforcing, some of those pre-conceptions. In focusing on the practicum, some researchers recall valuable practices and conceptualisations of teacher education from the past, and use these to set out an agenda for meeting the needs of contemporary pre-service

teachers, the teaching profession as a whole and the communities with whom the pre-service teachers are working (e.g., Doecke & Kostogriz, 2008; Ellis, 2012). Other research emphasises the deficits of existing programs and/or research and makes various claims to a 'new direction'. Thus Korthagen (2001) has proposed the notion of "realistic teacher education" and a research agenda associated with this, and we see the emergence of 'turns' in teacher education research – such as the "practicum turn" (e.g., Mattsson, Eilertsen & Rorisson, 2011) and the "practice turn" (e.g., Reid, 2011).

All of this research claims to be concerned with bringing together theory and practice, in developing (or producing) the next generation of teachers. Some researchers make explicit their concern that pre-service teachers must experience and engage with the complexity of culturally diverse educational spaces, and some encourage participation in what van de Ven (2011) calls "a societal, public debate on education, where teachers are challenged by complaints, assumptions, common sense knowledge on education and a great deal of scepticism" (p. 203 ). For over forty years, universities have offered students the opportunity to undertake some sort of overseas fieldwork, partly to productively disturb students ingrained understandings of culture and teaching and partly in an attempt to connect them to international perspectives on teaching, education and culture (Lee, 2011; Stachowski, 1992). Our study aligns with the body of research that aims to build on valuable research into international intercultural programs from the past, and to productively disturb some of the pre-service teachers' ingrained conceptions of education and intercultural teaching and learning (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Parr, 2012; Santoro & Major, 2012).

This paper reports on one such international teaching practicum, wherein a cohort of pre-service students from Australia undertakes a three week practicum in schools and community-based settings in Johannesburg, South Africa. The practicum is part of an ongoing intercultural project, supported by partnerships between universities in Australia and South Africa, and ongoing relationships with schools and NGOs in the host country. Using a combination of narrative-based inquiry methods (cf. Parr, 2010; Smith, 1987), we inquire into the experiences of pre-service teachers who undertook the practicum from 2009-2011. Our data includes the writing and experiences of a critical friend and a teacher educator who have also experienced the South African practicum. One of the authors, Jenny, was a member of the original cohort in 2009. She returned to Johannesburg as a critical friend and researcher with the second cohort of pre-service teachers in 2010. Graham led the pilot practicum in 2009 and has since mentored students on two subsequent practicums, while conducting an ongoing research study into the practicum over the three years. The cohorts of pre-service teachers who have travelled to Johannesburg were small enough to live together in the one venue – eleven students in 2009, eight in 2010, and 17 in 2011 – and they included both primary and secondary teachers. The range of subject areas in which they specialised was diverse, including English, science, maths, ICT, studies of society and the environment, visual arts, psychology, business studies, history, PE and of

course primary teachers who specialised across all disciplines. Data for the study includes: the research journals that both Jenny and Graham kept during the practicum; focus group interviews with the cohorts of pre-service teachers during and after each practicum; and some follow up interviews with graduate teachers 12 months after they had completed their practicum. The data shows that most participants in this international teaching practicum – and we include pre-service students, MEd researcher and a teacher educator in this participation – were able to identify and articulate, during and after the practicum, significant shifts in their conceptions of teaching and education and their identities as educators in a global multicultural world.

### **Why an international teaching practicum?**

Education policy makers in Australia have recently emphasised the multicultural nature of contemporary schools and society, when publishing standards for professional teachers (MCEECDYA, 2011b) and for graduate teachers (MCEECDYA, 2011a). In the graduate standards, the term ‘multicultural’ seems to apply both to the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students preparing to be teachers and also to the cultural mix of students in Australian classrooms whom they will be teaching when they graduate. According to these standards, teacher education institutions take responsibility for a culturally diverse range of teachers developing a culturally diverse range of understandings, knowledge and skills that will enable school children to contribute to, and benefit from, a multicultural twenty-first century world (DEECD, 2011). This is not just a matter of pre-service teachers learning a body of knowledge about multiculturalism before they enter the teaching workforce. Teachers must continue to be “responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 5). The implication is that teachers should continue to learn about, and be responsive to multicultural issues throughout their teaching lives. A professional predisposition to keep learning and being responsive to multiple cultures is best developed, it is widely argued in socio-cultural research, when pre-service teachers are over time “made aware of cultures ([their] own and others) and ... made aware of how this will help them interpret and understand others” (Dooly & Villanueva, 2006, p. 226; see also Florio-Ruane, 2001; Singer, 1998).

Many argue that some type of intercultural experiential learning should be central to every teacher education course (Cushner et al., 2007; Quezada, 2004; Wilson, 1982, 1993; Zeichner, 1992). Some recommend an international practicum for all students (Merryfield, 2002; Stachowski et al., 2007, p. 118; Willard-Holt, 2001). However, the costs and infrastructure required for an international practicum are accessible to only a small number of universities and a small number of students (cf. Mahon & Cushner, 2000; Roberts, 2007). Students usually have to fund most of their own airfares and

living expenses while overseas. This raises one of many ethical dilemmas for a teacher education provider in Australia contemplating a practicum in South Africa, while supposedly committed to catering for the needs of a diverse range of pre-service teachers. Can an international practicum be helpful for building global awareness if it is economically elitist? The ethical dilemmas do not stop there. When the host country for an international practicum is a developing country (e.g., Johnson, 2009; Parr, 2012; Santoro & Major, 2012), the potential for colonialist opportunism on the part of the visiting cohorts of pre-service teachers always threatens (Parr, 2012). And there is some evidence in the literature of pre-service students treating their international practicum experience as educational tourism (e.g., Quezada, 2004). In these situations, there are undoubted benefits for the university student-tourist but little regard for the host students or schools who are left to pick up where they left off before the tourists radically interrupted their usual programs. Spivak (1990) has drawn attention to supposedly philanthropic educational projects in under-developed countries, where middle-class westerners visit disadvantaged communities to ‘do good works’ and then return to the comfort of their homes. Her sense is that such people are often motivated by a desire to “check[] out” whether marginalised communities are “feeling sufficiently marginal” (p. 791). But does this mean one should not offer an international practicum to students for fear that some individual in the group might be an educational tourist? Clearly, there are no easy answers to these question. As we show in this paper, such questions were always weighing on our minds in planning for each practicum in South Africa, in undertaking the practicums and in writing about them.

### **Our own perspectives as participant researchers**

The two authors were part of a cohort from a Faculty of Education in an Australian university, which we will call Monroe University, who collectively undertook a pilot teaching practicum, in 2009. At that stage, Graham, who had designed the practicum (in association with colleagues from a partner university in South Africa), was coordinating the day to day activities of the practicum, playing a mentoring role with the pre-service students on the practicum and exploring various research projects that would potentially enrich a longer term practicum project in South Africa. Since then, he has travelled with two further cohorts of pre-service teachers to Johannesburg, and seen the practicum project develop into a multi-agency, multi-agended project involving ongoing partnerships with a university, with schools (both privileged and acutely disadvantaged), and with various non-government organisations. Graham has written elsewhere (Parr, 2012) about the ways this initial experience prompted significant changes in his own thinking about his work as a teacher educator, and how it enriched his “professional and research identit[y]” and his understanding of his connection to “the Other” (p. 107) in educational and cultural terms .

Jenny was one of the pre-service teachers undertaking her practicum in that pilot program in 2009. She completed her first practicum predominantly in a co-educational, fee-paying, public high school in the Gauteng region of Johannesburg, which we will refer to in this paper as Pine High School. Like the pre-service teachers in Beck and Kosnik's (2002) study, Jenny remembers approaching her practicum experience with a personal focus. As a soon-to-be graduating pre-service teacher – this was her final semester in a one year Graduate Diploma of Education – she was concerned with acquiring new teaching strategies and classroom management techniques, collecting interesting teaching ideas, obtaining feedback from her mentor teachers in South Africa, and ultimately having a good final teaching report from her university that would help her to get a job back in Australia. As it turned out, her experience at Pine High School was not necessarily what she expected. She was left with as many questions as answers about the experience of teaching in an intercultural setting. These unanswered questions prompted her to enrol in an MEd degree the following year, which enabled her to return to the sites of her teaching and learning in Johannesburg, to live and work with the next cohort of pre-service teachers in the role of a buddy or critical friend, and to undertake research (under Graham's supervision) into the student experience of an international, intercultural teaching practicum. The more that she has inquired into the experiences of the 2010 students on the South African practicum in the context of her MEd research, the more she has learned. At the end of her experience at Pine High School, she had learnt much about effective classroom strategies, certainly, but she had also learned a great deal about culture and diversity, and about the value of educators working collaboratively to meet the needs of diverse students in their care. She had learned more about herself as a learner, and about education more broadly. Like Graham, she looked forward to the opportunity to revisit this intercultural experience, literally and through more sustained reflection, in a follow-up practicum in Johannesburg. At the conclusion of her Master's research study (Chan, 2012), Jenny was able say with confidence; “[I can now] see past my narrowly individual goals as a pre-service teacher and consider in more complex ways the context I was teaching in – the culture of my students, the school community, the effects of this culture on their schooling experience, and the effect of my presence on the school and the community.”

## **Identity work in teacher education practicums**

The differences in the range of teacher education programs and teacher education research mentioned at this start of this paper are often starkly illustrated by the differences in the way the program or research theorises pre-service teacher identity. McLean (1999) believes that a teacher's images of him/herself as a person and as a teacher constitute a professional context in which new experiences are understood and acted upon, and the interplay between the two 'images' might be seen as informing a

teaching identity. Clearly, in this theorization of identity the notion of individual free will is at best problematic. Some argue, however, that pre-service teachers have a strong degree of choice in how their teaching identities are shaped. For instance, Maxine Greene (1981) describes the process of becoming a teacher as a process of choosing yourself – making deeply personal choices about who you will be as a teacher. But do pre-service teachers have complete freedom to make their own personal choices?

Greene's supposed autonomy can be seen as problematic when one recalls all of the literature that shows how pre-service teachers enter teacher education carrying certain powerful stereotypical images of a teacher (Britzman, 2003). This includes deeply embedded teaching metaphors and opinions of good teaching, derived from personal educational experiences but also from family attitudes and from various institutions. Together all of this mediates pre-service teachers' values, their choices and their professional decisions (Sugrue, 1997). In addition, they are open to a wide range of changing social (Beijaard, 1995; Sugrue, 1997) and contextual influences (Samuel & Stephens, 2000). All this means that the 'identity work' involved in becoming a teacher is a complex ongoing process of interaction with these past experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs, while working with new and sometimes unsettlingly different perspectives on teaching.

A teaching practicum can offer a powerful range of experiences to promote pre-service teachers' identity work. On a traditional practicum pre-service teachers interact with many social and cultural dimensions of the new school environment, they connect with and attempt to build upon the experiences and the learning they have engaged in earlier, and they anticipate what other experiences might follow when they graduate and become full members of the teaching profession. This study takes the view that a pre-service teacher's 'teaching identity' will continue to be "deconstructed, constructed and reconstructed" (Samuel & Stephens, 2000, p. 476) not just throughout their pre-service teacher education, but onwards throughout the teacher's whole career (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

The nature of a teaching identity in a richly multicultural space is influenced by the degree to which a teacher feels connected to or engaged with the multiculturalism within which he/she teaches. Thirty years ago, Wilson (1982) was arguing that teachers need to become "global citizens" themselves before they can teach this to their students in their own local context – they need to "gain knowledge about the rest of the world and, through interaction with others, be able to take off their own country's glasses and look at the world from multiple perspectives" (Wilson, 1993, p. 21). More recently, Cushner and Mahon (2002) suggest that an impactful cross-cultural experience can trigger an individual pre-service teacher's questioning of others' cultures and aspects of their own. We would argue that this questioning can certainly help their identity work.

## Framing interculturality in an international teaching practicum

Wilson's (1993) framing of what she calls "cross-cultural experiential learning" invariably involves a return 'journey' out of, and back to, one's own cultural comfort zone. The individual who returns is in some sense different from the individual who set out on the journey. While this sort of journeying can happen to and from a multicultural school one kilometre from a teacher education institution, this notion of a journey can be, according to much of the research cited earlier, more explicit in the learning of pre-service teachers (and teacher educators) on an international practicum. Wilson (1993) organises the benefits of a cross-cultural education journey into four 'aspects': (1) "Substantive knowledge" of other cultures and a general awareness of world issues, global dynamics, and human choices; (2) "Perceptual understanding", including open-mindedness and empathy towards people of other cultures and resistance to stereotyping and chauvinism; (3) "Personal growth" in areas such as independence, self-confidence and self-discovery; and (4) "Interpersonal connections", including the building of relationships with people of other cultures during their visit and also after returning home.

In order to tease out the nature of the intercultural learning process on an international practicum, to better understand what is involved in becoming "interculturally competent" and in achieving Wilson's (1993) four aspects of cross-cultural education as defined above, we have found it useful to consider Taylor's (1994) learning model that reflects the long-term process of learning to become "interculturally competent". Taylor describes intercultural competency as "the adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture" (p. 154). Like Taylor, in our research of pre-service students' learning (and our own learning on these practicums) we have been concerned with the ways people (both pre-service students and others) adapt their thinking and practices in order to work effectively in dialogue with another culture. In Jenny's MEd research, she worked with Taylor's intercultural learning model, exploring and amending its six components according to the stories she heard and the experiences she encountered first as a pre-service teacher and then as a critical friend and researcher. Graham has written about the experience of initiating and leading this international curriculum working with Giroux's (2005) conception of boundary pedagogy (Parr, 2012), but he has also found Taylor's framing generative in seeking to understand the nature of the intercultural learning that the students (and he himself) were engaged in on this international practicum. The six components are:

### (1) *Setting the stage*

This first stage acknowledges that an individual enters an intercultural experience – in our study this can be entering into the practicum as a whole but it can also be entering into yet another new classroom or community setting in Johannesburg – trying to find his/her cultural bearings, and to a large extent relying on prior experiences. These prior experiences could be memorable classroom

events in a previous practicum; they could relate to personal goals (such as the desire to ‘make a difference’ in the world) that are not solely located in educational studies; and they could relate to a previous intercultural experience or an encounter with difference (in or out of the classroom) that continues to weigh on the mind of the pre-service teacher. Clearly, all of these will influence the intercultural learning process.

### *(2) Cultural disequilibrium*

This is similar to what is more commonly known as ‘culture shock’. “Cultural disequilibrium”, according to Taylor, is when one feels a clash between one’s host culture and one’s primary culture, possibly leading to feelings of loneliness, alienation, uncertainty, frustration and/or fear. For Taylor, “cultural disequilibrium” is “the driving force that pushes the participant to become interculturally competent in the host culture” (Taylor, 1994, p. 161), but (and this is *not* something that Taylor concedes) it might just as well tip someone over the edge to the point where he/she feels he is not coping. Our study has shown that the consequences of cultural disequilibrium are not always negative, but neither are they inevitably positive.

### *(3) Nonreflective orientation*

According to Taylor, an individual can appear to be in a state of either nonreflective or reflective orientation. Our judgement is that the categories are hardly ever simple or clearly demarcated. Nevertheless, we interpret the notion of nonreflective orientation as involving little or no questioning of prior values and assumptions, and little conscious recognition of the change taking place, either in terms of cultural disequilibrium or in an evolving intercultural identity. Like all teachers, many a pre-service teacher has had to act immediately in a moment where there is no time to reflect or vacillate. Or they may need to put their heads down and persevere through at least brief periods where they are in survival mode – at these times, just getting through the day is the priority. This mode might be described by Taylor as nonreflective orientation.

### *(4) Reflective orientation*

This represents deep critical thought. On the South African practicum this could be evidenced in conversations with individuals and in reflective writing that individuals did. This talk or writing might be seen as demonstrable evidence of having achieved a level of intercultural competence, but in our study we preferred to consider the ways in which the language of reflection can be a catalyst for further intercultural dialogue and growth. At these times, a self-conscious connection can be made between a pre-service teacher’s prior beliefs and the particular experiences he/she is



encountering on the practicum. This influences the individual's decision making, including their choice of learning strategies, practices, and their awareness of actual change taking place in an evolving intercultural identity (see below).

(5) *Behavioural learning strategies*

These strategies include the actions taken and the pedagogical tools deployed, reflectively and nonreflectively, in an effort to grapple with the challenge of "cultural disequilibrium". In the collegial community of pre-service students and mentors on the South African practicum, these learning strategies were sometimes but not always a matter of individual choice. Sometimes, a particular learning strategy was more likely to emerge from collaborative activity with peers, either in planning an episode of teaching or in the act of team teaching. Together, the range of learning strategies employed by pre-service teachers contributed to each individual's learning journey and identity work. In contributing to these strategies, an individual could choose to act as: (a) an observer: listening, watching, reading; (b) a participant: in various ways contributing to the development of social practices; or (c) a friend: supporting, consoling, celebrating, sharing or (d) a combination of all of these.

(6) *Evolving intercultural identity*

This phrase is a way of describing the changes that can take place among the pre-service teachers during the practicum experience. It might also apply to changes in the weeks of preparation before leaving Australia for Johannesburg, and in the reflective writing and de-briefing conversations that pre-service teachers participate in after they return from South Africa. The notion of 'evolving intercultural identity' is, in one respect, an attempt to capture the essence of pre-service teachers' identities that contribute to their learning; in that sense it could be seen as the end 'product' of that learning. Developments in this perspective on identity can include: a shift in values or educational philosophy, increased self-confidence, stronger disposition to work and learn collaboratively, or a change in cultural perspective (such as no longer presuming one's own experiences to be some sort of cultural norm). These developments can occur as a result of a complex learning process made up of the participants' use of "behavioural learning strategies", "reflective and nonreflective orientation", their awareness of and response to "cultural disequilibrium" and their conscious building on prior experiences, knowledge and skill. We feel it is important to point out that, despite Taylor's use of the term 'competence', our reading of intercultural identity is that it is dynamic and ever-evolving – not just an end product. Or as Taylor (1994) himself says, "there is always the potential for greater competency with each new intercultural experience" (p. 167). Thus competence represents less a sense of achieving 'levels' and more a continuing process

where “the participants’ cultural identity is no longer linked to one culture, in that they are [increasingly] able to identify and understand the perspectives of the host culture” (p. 167).

Other investigations of cross-cultural experience (such as those by Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Sahin, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001) explore the effect of a cross-cultural teaching experience on the personal, professional and cultural development of individual pre-service teachers. Although varied in context, scale, and duration, the ‘findings’ of all three studies suggest positive benefits for pre-service teachers in regards to the cross-cultural dimensions outlined by Wilson (1993), and show evidence of an “evolving intercultural identity” (Taylor, 1994). ‘Findings’ such as those outlined in these studies suggest that it is possible for pre-service teachers’ experience of a cross-cultural teaching practicum to promote their thinking about and openness to cultural diversity. Cushner et al., (2002), Sahin (2008) and Willard-Holt (2001) each claim that students on their international practicums developed a greater appreciation of the host culture, and they were more able to ‘connect’ with the host community and culture. This would suggest that the students on these programs were engaged in more than an “educational tourist” experience (Quezada, 2004). Typically, in these studies the individual pre-service teacher who was successfully undertaking an intercultural practicum was more likely to consider the particular needs of the students whose culture he/she was beginning to understand. This pre-service teacher was less likely (for instance) to be teaching from a generic and supposedly culturally neutral textbook. He/she was more likely to be co-constructing culturally hybrid knowledge for and with his/her students rather than *transmitting* content that might be alienating for either the students or the teacher or both. In addition, the notion of the interculturally competent pre-service teacher suggests the individual is more capable of thinking reflexively, beyond the particular time and place of the educational moment; he/she is more likely to seek ways of situating each particular teaching and learning moment within a broader framework of “societal, public debate” (van de Ven, 2011) about intercultural education, as we discuss earlier.

### **The ‘everyday’ of intercultural identity work on an international practicum**

In the space left for us in this essay, we will report on some of the perspectives of a range of Monroe University pre-service teachers about their experience on this teaching practicum in South Africa. But before this we would like to share two narratives that are reconstructed (and re-shaped) versions of journal entries that each of us wrote, separately, during our time on the 2010 practicum. We do this partly to make explicit the dialogic process of writing this paper (cf. Parr & Doecke, 2012).

Graham’s narrative describes his experience in August 2010, when he, all of the Monroe pre-service students and Jenny touched down in Johannesburg to be greeted by the news that South Africa was in

the grip of nation-wide industrial action. State school teachers were on strike, and state schools across South Africa had closed (along with state owned hospitals). He would have to re-allocate the pre-service teachers who were scheduled to teach in state schools in the early part of the practicum, even though in doing so he would perhaps be undermining the efforts of education unions in South Africa who were urging the government to keep its promise and address their claims. In Jenny's narrative, she writes about the experience of interacting with the Monroe pre-service students as they were learning to teach children from acutely disadvantaged backgrounds in the volunteer run 'Weekend School' (a pseudonym) in our partner university in Johannesburg, which we will call 'International University'. The pre-service students' experience of learning to teach in this multicultural setting involved developing what Taylor would call appropriate "behavioural learning strategies" for teaching children from underprivileged backgrounds. But it was not a matter of learning a strategy and that strategy liberating them from their almost chronic "cultural disequilibrium". For the pre-service teachers, as for Jenny and Graham, the practicum was very much a process of managing an "evolving intercultural identity", in which they had to become comfortable with disequilibrium and with not knowing all the answers.

### **Graham's narrative**

*The entire public service sector in South Africa has been on strike for several weeks. The newspapers and mainstream media carry headlines such as "SHAME" and "TOTAL COLLAPSE LOOMS". The South African Government had promised that after the World Cup Soccer tournament, held in South Africa earlier this year, underpaid state school teachers would receive generous pay rises. The vast majority of demonstrations involving teachers and education unionists across the country have been peaceful. However, there have been isolated outbreaks of very ugly and sometimes tragic violence. Graphic footage of this violence dominates the newspapers and the evening news bulletins.*

*In the wake of this violence or threats of violence, almost all public schools in South Africa are shutting down. Any school that is suspected of operating during this strike runs the risk of itself being the focus of some of this ugly violence. This means that the children of South Africa who most desperately need an education have no school to go to. Meanwhile, most private schools continue to operate with only slightly increased security measures.*

*Although the media give the impression of total anarchy, we (the pre-service teachers and I) are all very safe. All of the students are accommodated safely in a guest house well away from trouble spots. We are careful not to travel anywhere near places where trouble might be*

*brewing. Security remains an issue needing constant monitoring, but it is very much under control.*

*There are other issues over which I feel I have less control. The timing for this practicum is surely not optimal for the local state-school teachers. Whose rights are being served by our remaining here? I want to support the actions of the South African teachers who are engaged in industrial action across the country, seeking better conditions and pay. Seeking respect. And yet, as coordinator of this international practicum I feel obliged to seek out alternative schools in the private sector as hosts for our pre-service teachers. I talk about this with my colleagues from International University in Johannesburg. We discuss the time and resources that have been invested into this international practicum... I feel an ethical obligation not to jeopardize the long term transnational education project by abandoning our commitments to some local communities and flying home. But I can't help thinking that our continued presence here right now is evidence of the sort of opportunism that I had hoped to avoid.*

*As the days go by on this practicum, a voice in my head from time to time mentions the word, opportunist, yet I am also conscious that the pre-service teachers have witnessed a whole variety of inspirational actions by individual citizens and social collectives in all walks of professional and community life in South Africa. Some professional people in Johannesburg have temporarily left their 'normal' routines and work in order to set up clandestine schools or 'study centres' for state school children who just want to go to school. The 'Weekend School', run mostly by student volunteers and some academics from International University for kids from the local 'informal settlement', continues to operate. It can do so because it is protected behind electric fencing and elaborate security systems of International University. The ethical dilemmas here are not just mine as coordinator of the practicum. I want the pre-service students, also, to be aware of the situation in which we find ourselves, although I don't want to discomfort or alarm them unduly.*

### **Jenny's narrative**

*The 'Weekend School' is a fascinating phenomenon. Every Weekend morning at about 8.30am, over 100 children from the surrounding informal settlement arrive at International University in buses paid for with funding raised by the Department of Community Engagement at the University. Security guards wave the buses through the heavy iron gates and sophisticated security systems. Despite the underprivileged housing where these children have woken up, they excitedly tumble out of the buses all of them neatly dressed. The pre-*

*service teachers and I watch from a distance as the children (from early primary age through to students in their final year of secondary school) enter the university buildings. They laugh and wrestle and run around like regular kids.*

*Later, as I watch children in their scheduled literacy classes, I see that some are very keen – they hang on every word that the Monroe pre-service teachers say. Others are clearly not engaged. Some of the children struggle to speak English. Some don't speak at all. The children's reading, writing and listening skills seem below even what the pre-service teachers had been warned to expect.*

*Every minute of this Weekend School is an education for the pre-service teachers ... for all of us. After class, the pre-service teachers and I are watching again as the children line up for their lunch. We can't help wondering what the children had for breakfast, or if they had any breakfast, and what they will do when the bus takes them back home again.*

*One hour later, in a scheduled de-briefing meeting of all the pre-service teachers, I invite them to talk about a particular incident from the morning that they found interesting, inspiring or disturbing. Gabby shares her experience of teaching a literacy lesson to a large group of (40-45) early primary students. She tells us how she had been reading a storybook to the class, when she noticed that one of the girls was crying. Her first thought was that the girl was crying because the snake in the storybook frightened her. These were young kids after all. But, as Gabby goes on to explain to us in hushed tones, she would soon have cause to wonder whether this distress was due to something more sinister than a snake in a children's storybook. It turned out the girl was crying because her arm was badly bruised – really badly bruised. Gabby examined the arm and wondered what – or who – could have bruised her arm so badly. Unsure of what to do next, she turned to one of the local adult volunteers for help, who proceeded to take the girl outside and console her, while Gabby tried to continue reading the story without worrying the other children. Even as Gabby tells us this story two hours after the episode, she still appears shocked and concerned that she couldn't do more to help.*

Within the secure borders of International University, concerns over the national industrial action can seem at such a remove from Graham's account of the Monroe pre-service teachers' learning about and responding to these children in the Weekend School. In a sense, there is something fundamental to all teaching in the account of Gabby's situation. A teacher in an unfamiliar setting is confronted by the unexpected. She must respond to it in the most professional and ethical way she can think of in the moment, and move on. As a pre-service teacher in an unfamiliar educational environment, in a foreign

country, teaching children she barely knew, Gabby became concerned as to whether the bruising on the arm of one of her students might have come from some domestic/family violence. She was not sure ethically or pedagogically what was the right thing to do... but she had to act anyway. There was no time for deep reflection. Not to act was not an option. But acting collegially *was* an option. Significantly, Gabby chose to seek out and connect with a colleague (in this case a local volunteer) who was able to deal with the issue, while she was able to continue with the reading of her story. Later, she was willing and able to connect with other colleagues (her practicum peers) to share her story, to obtain some feedback from her peers, and to reflect collectively on the issues that this episode had raised.

The sense of cultural disequilibrium (Wilson, 1993) that runs through both narratives, and the need for all on this international practicum to live with uncertainty, was something that almost all students who have undertaken the South African practicum have commented upon in focus groups or in individual reflective writing. One of the students from the 2011 cohort, whose practicum was partly spent in an acutely under-staffed and under-resourced school, expressed it this way:

To say my peers and I were outside of our comfort zone would be an understatement. Two of my colleagues [in one school] were spending full days with children who couldn't speak any English, an English specialist was teaching maths, and I was an art teacher without an art classroom. This was not like the Australian classrooms we had experienced before our trip, and whilst these were challenging circumstances, they were conditions through which we flourished. While most of our jaws dropped at the sight of several unsupervised year 8 classrooms, we were quick to adapt, we became more flexible and uninhibited, we worked and learnt in collegial ways... (Alida, 2011 practicum)

## Conclusions

While there was only one year when the South African practicum had to negotiate a national teachers' strike, all three years of the practicum have featured challenging and often unexpected situations and encounters with different people, institutions, practices and cultures. The overwhelming feedback from students, a brief selection of which we present below, is that the practicum has been extraordinary for them *because* of, not in spite of, these ongoing encounters with difference and with the dilemmas that they invariably provoked. Crucial to these students' experience of the practicum, also, is the focus that is established in preparations for each international experience on seeking to *better understand* a different culture and a different people even as one learns to teach within this culture. Students often commented upon the strong reinforcement, across all stages of the practicum, on the need to understand all educational work as a collegial collaborative practice.

It is possible to organise some of the feedback from the pre-service students who have undertaken this South African practicum over three years into the four aspects that Wilson proposes for “cross-cultural experiential learning”, as follows:

#### *Substantive knowledge*

I feel [the South African practicum] has broadened my knowledge of the world.... It has sparked my interest not only in South Africa, but the whole African continent, and has begun to shape my views on politics in that area. (Gina, 2010 practicum)

To put this in a curriculum context, [it is now my sense that] racism in Old South Africa (pre 1994) was the old curriculum. Anti-racism in the New South Africa is the new curriculum. Racism in Australia and South Africa remains the hidden curriculum. (Sandy, 2009 practicum)

#### *Perceptual understanding*

These opportunities [on the practicum] proved to me that teachers with real passion can create classroom environments that are engaging, purposeful and educational, even without resources. I have gained a new appreciation for the value of education. (Rita, 2009 practicum)

[I have developed] a renewed appreciation for my chosen career. Teaching is an extremely valuable contribution I can make to my own community. (Patty, 2010 practicum)

#### *Interpersonal connections*

This experience has shown me the benefits of building great relationships with your colleagues. Next year I intend to be as pro-active as possible about building these relationships ...It made my days so much more enjoyable at [a challenging school placement]. (John, 2010 practicum)

#### *Personal growth*

I've grown a lot more appreciative towards different cultures... [Through the practicum] I have learned the importance of understanding and taking the time to both see and value difference amongst all people. (Jean, 2010 practicum)

As impressive as these reflections on the South African practicum might seem, we do not want to suggest that all students have been completely happy and fulfilled throughout the three years of the practicum we are focusing on here. In almost all cases, students have responded very positively to the experience, notwithstanding uncomfortable moments of being ‘outside of their comfort zones’. But we do not want to sell Monroe University’s South African teaching practicum or any other international practicums as a must-do solution to some perceived deficits in teacher education in Australia today. Some pre-service students genuinely struggle, even after a program of cultural preparation before leaving Australia, even when supported by close-knit collegial teams of peers, even with the presence of at least one senior lecturer from Australia with them in South Africa.

However, the South African practicum has provided a fascinating set of experiences (over three years) for inquiring into the rich and complex identity work of pre-service teachers undertaking an

international practicum in a particular intercultural context. Taylor's (1994) framework has been helpful for us, Jenny and Graham, in our ongoing conversation about the benefits, dilemmas and problematic sides of the South African international intercultural practicum. Most of the evidence points to this practicum being genuinely powerful and beneficial in promoting pre-service teachers' "evolving intercultural identity".

As we tried to portray in our narratives above, there were moments when the experience of 'cultural disequilibrium' became so acute for participants on the practicum as to be almost debilitating. These moments were deeply challenging for individuals, for groups and sometimes for the whole practicum community. The richest learning tended to come when individuals, groups or the whole practicum were able to grapple with these challenges in mutually supportive, collegial ways, when they were able to find a way of dealing with a particular cultural or pedagogical or curriculum challenge in a way that a professional teacher might be proud to say: such is the work required of teachers in today's multicultural world.

Significantly, this teaching and educational work has taken place in culturally complex, richly relational, often ethically complicated settings. One of the most powerful 'discoveries' made by the pre-service teachers who undertake this South African practicum often occurs when they have returned to Australia, and are reflecting in some depth on their experiences. For some pre-service teachers it is only then that they begin to appreciate the importance of an intercultural identity in the work of teachers. For all of us, though, the complex identity work and the ethical dilemmas that are associated with participation in an international teaching practicum continue on whether we are resuming our teaching or embarking upon a new teaching career back in Australia.



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