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Cross – Cultural Communication in Teacher Education: A Case Study of an Australian Pre-Service Teacher Placement in Liaoning, China

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study of the experiences and reflections of four fourth year pre-service teachers from Federation University Australia who completed their three-week teaching placement in Anshan, Liaoning Province, China, in April 2014. The study also explores the perspectives and opinions of both the Chinese mentor teachers and Chinese students towards the Australian pre-service teachers. The research confirms the mutual benefits of cross-cultural teacher education professional experiences for pre-service teachers, Chinese mentor teachers and Chinese students. The teaching experiences revealed major differences in educational concepts and teaching strategies and approaches between the two systems because of the different social and cultural contexts. The evidence from the voices of the participants indicates that the professional experience in these two Chinese schools fostered the Australian pre-service teachers' cross-cultural communication skills, developed their confidence and skills as teachers and generally enriched their personal and professional lives.

Introduction and Background

Cross-cultural experiences are considered a valuable contribution to the personal and professional growth of pre-service teachers (Sahin, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Pence & Macgillivray 2008; Chinnappan, McKenzie & Fitzimmons, 2013; Zhao & Meyers, 2009). In the preparation of teachers it is generally accepted in the research literature that cross-cultural experiences are helpful in preparing teachers to work with diverse students in multicultural classroom teaching. This is especially important for Australian teacher education program providers, as Australia is recognized as a culturally diverse nation through its varied immigration policies. In addition, the Australian Professional Standards for Graduate Teachers is clear that teacher education graduates need to 'Demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds' (AITSL, Australian Professional Standards for Teachers 2012, focus area, 1.3). Therefore it is important to enable teacher education students to undertake diverse professional experiences in varied socio-cultural settings and to educate pre-service teachers to understand teaching and learning in multi-cultural contexts as well as developing the student's ability to work with classes with multi-ethnic students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This paper reports on a cross-cultural teaching experience of pre-service teachers (PST) from the Faculty of Education and Arts, Federation University Australia to two middle schools in Anshan, Liaoning Province in north east China. Federation University Australia (FedUni) was created in January 2014 by bringing together the University of Ballarat and the Gippsland Campus of Monash University. The university offers higher education and vocational education and training on campuses in Ballarat, Gippsland and the Wimmera in the State of Victoria. The largest campus is situated at Ballarat, a city of around 100,000 people. FedUni is an open access university that is 'regional in focus, national in scope and international in reach' (Federation University Australia Charter, 2015). The students at the university come from a range of regional, rural and remote areas and many are from low socio-economic backgrounds and a high proportion are the first members of their family to receive higher education.

In order to provide pre-service teachers with an international, worldview and to enable graduates to engage students in learning effectively in multi-cultural class settings, FedUni has developed several overseas pre-service teacher placement locations that include Anshan, China. Consistent with a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Anshan Normal University and FedUni Australia, FedUni pre-service teachers (PSTs) in the third or fourth year of their Bachelor of Education Program were invited to go to primary or secondary schools in Anshan to undertake three to four weeks of pre-service teaching placement. During their teaching placement, the PSTs planned and taught English classes, attended regular teacher professional learning sessions and were involved in cooperative lesson preparation activities. They also had the opportunity to experience Chinese culture and learn to understand the Chinese education system including learning and teaching strategies and approaches.

Anshan is a regional city in northeast of China with a population of approximately four million. Prior to the trip, none of the pre service teachers had any cross-cultural teaching experiences in a classroom outside of the Australian context. For the four PSTs, this was their first visit to China, their first time to see a 'large' class (with 50-60 students) being taught by one classroom teacher and their first experience to start a working day before 7:00 am to prepare for the first lesson of the day which usually began at 8:00 am. For the PSTs these were new challenges and experiences drawing on new capabilities in the teaching and learning process.

The first author, being the Chinese speaking university mentor and the organizer of this Chinese placement went to China with the four PSTs. In order to study the broader picture of this international teaching practice, she interviewed the four local mentor teachers and surveyed 186 Chinese students who were taught by the FedUni PSTs, to seek their opinions and perspectives about how they felt working with the Australian PSTs and what they perceived as the contribution of the Australian PSTs to their educational setting. The interview and survey data provided valuable information for this research not only to inform the PST's China teaching experience, but also to better understand cross-cultural communication and teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Student teachers are likely to benefit from international teaching experience to a great extent by understanding more about children and teacher's views, beliefs and understandings and practices of learning and teaching in diverse contexts (Sahin, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Pence & Macgillivray 2008; Chinnappan, McKenzie & Fitzimmons, 2013; Zhao & Meyers, 2009). On a broader level, research literature suggests

that the benefits of an international teaching experience are professional and personal growth, including increased confidence, a better appreciation and respect for differences of others and other cultures, and an awareness of the importance that reflection play in professional cultural growth (Chinnappan, McKenzie & Fitzsimmons, 2013, cited in Pence & Macgillivray, 2006; Tome, 2004; Willard-Holt, 2001). Research on similar teacher education programs suggests that international experiences may contribute to student teachers' development in many different ways, such as improved: flexibility, tolerance, patience, self-confidence, self-criticism, politeness, independence and ability to adapt in a different culture (Willard-Holt, 2001; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Chinnappan, McKenzie & Fitzsimmons, 2013). Willard-Holt (2001) concluded that international student teaching experiences may potentially change beginning teacher's thinking about themselves, curriculum design, and teaching strategies; enhance skills and abilities of effective teachers; enable and encourage examination of personal beliefs, habits and values, and foster commitment to open-mindedness.

There is a convergence of views about the value of overseas professional experience and evidence of the use of such programs at numerous teacher education programs in Australia and internationally. Nevertheless, there still remains a great deal more focused research to be done in order to determine the full efficacy of such programs, including the specific elements of teacher pedagogy and identity that they help develop (Chinnappan, McKenzie & Fitzsimmons, 2013).

While most literature focuses on PST's perspectives and growth during the international teaching practice, our literature review indicated that very few studies look at the feedback from local mentor teachers and local students in terms of how they feel about the PST's teaching approaches and what the PSTs bring to the local host schools and the communities because of the language barriers. Therefore the answer to questions about the impact of PST's international teaching experience on the local context remain uncertain and need to be explored further. The focus of this research was to examine not only how the China teaching experience affected Australian PST's perspectives about teaching and learning and their personal and professional development, but also to explore what the Australian PSTs bring to the local Chinese context. This was achieved through examining the experiences and voices of local mentor teachers and students. Our study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the Australian PSTs reflect on their China experience, and what is the impact of this cross-cultural placement on the Australian PST's personal and professional development?
2. How do the Chinese mentor teachers and students perceive their experiences with the Australian PSTs, and how does this cross-cultural practice contribute to the local context from the viewpoint of mentor teachers and students?

The entire research was organized around the exploration of these central questions. Based on these questions some more specific reflective questions were developed to seek feedback from the three different participant groups. The research was approved prior to the China trip by the Ethics Committee of Federation University Australia.

Research Methods and Procedures

The principles and practices of a qualitative case study were employed for this research project. Underpinning this qualitative approach was the fact that case-study research is oriented toward developing ‘thick’ descriptions of particular phenomena (events, experiences, and the meanings that are attached to them) within an epistemology of the particular (Merriam, 1988). In the tradition of case-study research, this study sought to provide a particularistic, holistic and descriptive account of how Australian PSTs interpreted their experiences in China and how the Chinese mentor teachers and students perceived their experiences working with the Australian PSTs. The research was also guided by the belief that case study is the preferred strategy when:

- a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control (Yin, 2003, p.9)
- researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 1990, p.10)
- the kind of evidence required is what people tell you and what they do which enables the researcher to understand the meaning of what is going on (Gillham, 2000, p.10).

Using this qualitative case study approach, we organized this research project to enable the voices of the participants to be heard. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout the study.

The four fourth year students from the Bachelor of Education program voluntarily participated in the research. These PSTs had already successfully completed more than 70 days of professional placement at primary and secondary schools in Australia. The minimum requirement for registration by the Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT) is 80 days of supervised teaching experience.

There were two male PST participants: ‘Daniel’ age 27 years, and ‘Tim’ age 28. There were two female PSTs: ‘Laura’ age 26 years and ‘Amanda’ age 23. They were all Australian born and of AngloSaxon backgrounds. Before the trip, they had very little knowledge or understanding of China or the Chinese education system. They were selected from the applicants by staff from the Faculty Professional Experience Office based on the PST’s academic results and their interest and request to undertake a Chinese teaching experience. The Chinese partner university offered free accommodations for both the PSTs and the university mentor. In addition, each of the PSTs received a subsidy of AUD\$2,000 from the Asian Mobility grant provided by the Australian government which made the trip financially possible for the PSTs. At the beginning of the trip, they did not have any Chinese language skills.

During the three-week international teaching placement in China, the PSTs kept journals, which included daily experiences at school and other details of cultural experiences and excursions. The PSTs reflected on what they had observed at the school and how they felt about the Chinese educational concepts, student learning activities, teaching strategies and approaches, and also the lessons they taught. They also included observations and reflections on their weekend activities outside of school. At the conclusion of the trip, the student teachers completed final reflection papers, which were key data sources for this research. In addition, the researcher’s records of class observation in China and email communications with the PSTs were also used as data sources.

Under the arrangement of the partner university, the local District Education Bureau arranged two of the top ten key Middle schools (junior high schools, Year 7-9) to each host two of the student teachers. One of the schools had around 2,500 students and 44 classes

where the PSTs Daniel and Tim undertook their professional experience. The other school had around 2,000 students and 36 classes where the PSTs Laura and Amanda undertook their professional experience. Each of the schools selected two experienced leading English teachers as the local mentors. The student teachers not only gave lessons to the classes of their mentor teachers. They also delivered English lessons to other Year 7 classes. There were at least one or two lessons per day for each student teacher. In addition, they were involved in the collective unit and lesson planning and preparation with the group of English teachers in the school. They observed lessons delivered by other teachers and were involved in other activities such as becoming judges for the English language speaking competitions at the school and organizing some extra-curricular activities. In particular, as arranged by the local District Education Bureau, Daniel and Tim gave a demonstration lesson for over than 100 English teachers in the District. The principals of the two host schools have given extensive support for the placement activities and the two schools had been well prepared for this special placement.

Four local mentor teachers from the two host Chinese schools were also invited to participate in this research prior to the PSTs China professional experience. During the initial contact, the purpose of the study, the research process, and what would be required of them if they agreed to participate, was outlined. All of the Chinese teacher participants were female classroom teachers for a Year 7 class in their respective schools. They all had over ten years of experience in teaching English. Two of them had spent some time overseas in an English speaking country. However this was the first time for all four teachers to experience supervision of Australian PSTs who had no Chinese language skills.

After the Australian PSTs left China to return to Australia, the first author conducted a 40-60 minute individual interview in Mandarin with each of the local mentor teachers asking them about their feelings and personal and professional experiences while working with the Australian PSTs and their understanding of the contributions that the PSTs made to the local student's learning. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the informants.

There were 186 local Chinese students in the classes of the four local mentor teachers who participated in this study voluntarily. They were all Year 7 students in their first year of Chinese secondary school. After the Australian PSTs completed their placement in China, the Chinese students were surveyed about their opinions and attitudes of learning with the Australian student teachers. The survey was administered in their self-study time in the class. The students were informed that they did not have to put their name on the questionnaire. More importantly, it had been emphasized that their answers were not connected to any assessment outcomes of their performance in school to encourage children to express themselves openly.

'The challenge [of qualitative research] is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal' (Patton, 1990, pp.371-72). The authors coded key words, thoughts and main issues that identified key ideas, opinions, comments and concepts identifying the particular themes from the data. The process of sorting data segments into conceptions and categories, as well as identifying, rearranging, refining and modifying these in order to reflect emerging themes, was highly recursive. The data from the participants was analyzed, synthesized and interpreted to provide the findings for this case study project.

Findings and Discussion

To present the research findings we have organized the data into three broad themes; firstly, valuable cultural experiences for all participants; secondly, differences in educational concepts and teaching strategies, and thirdly, PSTs reflections of their personal and professional development. We recognize that these separate themes can be interpreted in multiple ways and extended across various categories. Where possible, for the purposes of this paper, we have focused on the original voices of the participants.

In general, the Australian PSTs, local mentor teachers and local students all highly valued this cross-cultural experience and considered it as an unforgettable and meaningful life experience. Some core values in traditional Chinese culture such as: respect for teachers, hospitality, and friendliness impressed the PSTs very much. The warm welcome and friendly treatment by the host school teachers and students, was remarked upon repeatedly.

Valuable Cultural Experiences and Relationships for Australian PSTs and the Chinese Teachers and Students

The PSTs all mentioned how stimulating and exciting the cultural experiences were for themselves and how they were welcomed warmly into the schools and the culture.

Daniel wrote:

Chinese students have been the friendliest and most respectful that I have come across in my time as a pre-service teacher. Similarly, all teachers have been very welcoming. Despite the linguistic barriers that exist between myself and many of the non-English speaking teachers, their non-verbal communication suggests a very warm and welcoming nature. (Daniel)

The sense of being respected and warmly welcomed to the school regardless of the language barrier was important to enable Daniel to feel comfortable and willing to do his best in his capacity as a student teacher. He went on to explain:

My mentor teacher did a great job of gradually handing me more responsibility as I became more comfortable and familiar with my classes. I feel that this has helped me to get a grasp of the approaches to Chinese teaching and learning, before implementing my own teaching style. I have gone from being quite nervous in not knowing how I will bring my own teaching style to China, to being very confident in doing so, and I believe this is due to my mentor and the way she eased me into my role as an English teacher in a foreign school. (Daniel)

Similarly, Laura expressed feeling warmly welcomed and highly respected and then went on to make some comparisons with Australian students. She wrote:

The Chinese students showed me a level of respect that I have not yet experienced in classes in Australia and in return I really felt like I was giving them more responsibility than their Australian counterparts and treated them as though they were much older than they are because of the respectful manner in which they acted They were so dedicated to their study, it was such a difference to the Australian students I was so used to. The majority of students knew what they wanted to do post-school, but if you asked that question of Year 7s in Australia very few could give you a realistic response. (Laura)

Both Daniel and Laura from each of the two schools noted the respect they received, the positive cultural experiences they had, and felt very comfortable to work in the Chinese schools. They appreciated the opportunity they had to learn more about intercultural communication and teaching and learning in a Chinese school setting. Laura also highlighted

the differences of her experiences with Australian students and the focus of the Chinese students learning and well thought through plans the students had for their future study and work ideas.

In an email, Amanda wrote:

Before coming to China I didn't have many assumptions about Anshan or China as a whole; yet when arriving I didn't expect to be so welcomed. I never felt alone or neglected and the staff and students were always welcoming and friendly. The students were beyond amazing; their manners, willingness to learn, intelligence and hardworking [approach] added to my enjoyment during my placement. What struck me most was how well behaved and disciplined the students were with 60 students in the class and none left their seat or spoke out of turn. The teachers were extremely accommodating when we asked questions about the curriculum or students' needs and went above and beyond in providing us with the relevant information. (Amanda)

Tim expressed similar thoughts:

Teaching in China has been an unbelievable and very rewarding experience. I have gained valuable teaching experience in how to teach a foreign language to students. I have learnt so much about the education system in China and how different it is to Australia. I have learnt about Chinese culture (celebrations, one child policy, food, economy, politics, employment, and lifestyle, etc.). But most importantly, I have made many new friends who were very welcoming and friendly towards me.... the students' positive reactions to my teaching was very rewarding professionally... I have had a once in a lifetime experience in Anshan and I will hold everything and everyone in my heart. (Tim)

All four students agreed about the warmth of the welcome and the respect they were given by students and teachers. Amanda noted the students were 'beyond amazing' in describing the students intelligence and eagerness to learn. All four PSTs highlighted the student focus on and engagement in their learning.

Similarly to the PSTs responses, the local mentor teachers also enjoyed working with the Australian student teachers. During the interviews, Teacher Zhang said:

In my nineteen years of teaching experience, this is the first time for me to supervise an overseas placement student. Daniel is very pleasant, positive, humble and approachable. The children were very fond of him. They are eager to practice English with him both in class and after class. There is no sense of alienation despite him being a foreigner. ... Daniel has brought something that my students and myself have not experienced before. The outdoor class "talking about weather" he designed has greatly promoted the enthusiasm for studying English amongst the students. (Zhang)

The Chinese teachers observed the behaviors and actions of the Australian PSTs and reported that they realized there were some core values exemplified by the PSTs, such as: honesty, sincerity, seriousness, democracy and equality, as well as a tolerance of different cultures. All mentor teachers had very positive impressions of the PSTs professional behaviors including their willingness to be involved in active engagement with the students learning. Mentor teachers also agreed that the student teachers were very good ambassadors to represent Australia and to share various aspects of the Australian culture and people.

Teacher Liu, from the other local school commented that:

Laura and Amanda have brought us a lot of pleasant surprises and opportunities for cultural exchange. Our school has close relationships with our sister schools in USA and does not have a lot of contact with Australian schools. They came and introduced us to the culture and customs of Australia and our students were very interested in them. Through the lessons on the "Australian culture" and "Australian animals", the enthusiasm of the students in learning English was improved. (Liu).

Teacher Liu noticed that the local students were very happy in their learning experiences and regarded this as a useful and ongoing emotion in the student's learning which would enable them to learn more positively and confidently.

The comments of mentor teacher Li were also very positive:

I felt that Amanda has the potential to be an excellent teacher. She is used to kneeling on the ground so that she can communicate with children at the same eye level. This has moved the kids and myself. The whole class liked her very much. On the day she left, she cried and so did the children and myself. The scene was really moving and touching. ... The potential of the students were well discovered using the discussion activities within the classes she designed. As there were different roles with the groups, the learning needs of students at different levels were all catered for. I felt that this is great and allowed me to see the learning potential of some of the students in my class which I had not discovered before. (Li)

It is an important insight that the teacher, Li saw the learning potential of some of her students in a different way when she observed their learning while they were being taught by Amanda using different teaching strategies. The planning of different discussion activities and changing the roles the students took in the group work, and the various ways they expressed themselves was carefully observed by the teacher who had the time and knowledge and interest to observe her students learning from a different viewpoint.

Another teacher, Mrs Wang, had other observations on the professional skills and working ability of the PSTs. During the interview, Mrs Wang said:

Their ability to work collaboratively including developing harmonious relationships with colleagues and students is something that I particularly appreciated. Their enthusiasm towards the profession including the patience and love shown to the children is something that I do want to highlight. The PSTs increased the student's interest in English learning. Personally, it has been a very enjoyable experience working with them. (Wang)

Mrs Wang went on to speak about how many of her students were now more able and confident to speak English because they had a good relationship with the Australian PSTs and were eager to communicate in English.

Every child in my class now dares to open their mouth to speak English. This is the greatest success from my point of view. The Australian PSTs did not bring about marked improvement in the students' test scores but I can observe the changes in the children. In the past, I have two children in my class who almost refused to participate in any class activities but they voluntarily speak in his class, which is a clear improvement (Wang).

Not only the PSTs and the mentor teachers but also the local Chinese students expressed how valuable the cultural experiences were for their learning.

In response to the survey questions the Chinese children commented positively on the student teachers' work and professionalism. Most students expressed important learnings and pleasant and enjoyable feelings working with the FedUni PSTs. In responding to what they liked about their Australian teachers, students responded to the anonymous questionnaire with the following typical comments:

I liked their class because they never blamed us, they respects us and treat us as friends ...

I enjoyed their sense of humor and the teaching strategies of edutainment [learning that is both educational and entertaining].

As a teacher, they are nice, friendly, open minded, enthusiastic and kind ...

I feel zero distance between teacher and student and also we are equal as human beings.

They are teachers who are easy going and approachable, they always answer our questions patiently (Questionnaire responses from local students)

The local students were clearly impressed with the respect and equality they felt in the relationships with the PSTs. The students felt that their questions were answered with patience and dignity, and that they were not blamed when they made mistakes in their classroom. All these aspects helped build students confidence and engagement in their learning of English.

When asked about what they would say to the PSTs in terms of their teaching, the students commented:

Your warm and cheerful personality touched me deeply.

We learned a lot about Australia, and Australian culture from you ...

Thank you to let us know learning English could be so interesting and amazing.

I changed my opinion towards English learning because of you ...

Thank you very much for bringing a breath of fresh air to my school life.

(Questionnaire responses from local students).

All of the above voices from the three groups of participants confirmed that this is not only a teaching and learning professional experience but also a mutually beneficial cross-cultural experience that contributes to the cultural understandings of all participants. In particular, it stimulated the interest and engagement of these Chinese students in learning English language, as well as Australia as a country, the Australian people and Australian culture. Most importantly, it provided a new perspective for the Chinese students to think about their approaches to learning English. To this end, the significance of this cross-cultural teaching experience was not limited to teaching and learning but extended to a more broad landscape of mutual understanding between the two cultures.

Major Differences in Educational Concepts and Teaching Strategies

Besides the very pleasant feelings the three group's participants had in terms of building cross cultural understandings, data revealed substantial differences in educational concepts and teaching strategies between the two societies and the two educational systems because of the vast contrasts in social, political and cultural contexts.

The PSTs, in commenting on their understandings and learning about Chinese school education, Chinese teachers' methods and approaches and the ways they organize classes noted important differences.

Laura wrote:

I was surprised by how intense and competitive it was, even at the Year 7 level, particularly considering the student ages. I am not sure that I could really comment because the situation was so totally different to any that I have experienced in Australia. With 50 plus students in a classroom it is difficult to really get an understanding of the class organization. I think the curriculum was a little bit daunting... And the most difficult aspect in terms of lesson planning and trying to integrate an Australian way of learning into our classes was the lack of space inside the classroom. We are very used to having ample space both inside and out in which to work, but this is not the case in China. ... It certainly required some different thinking. (Laura)

It was difficult for Laura to comprehend the competitiveness in Chinese education system. The limited classroom spaces and the class size with 50-60 students in one class brought new challenges to the PSTs classroom organization and teaching routines. The spaces for learning and the ways students and teachers could move around within the spaces

was something that is valued in teaching for diversity and inclusion in Australian school settings. This also links to the previous example where Amanda was noted as being able to move around the classroom and kneel next to children to connect with them at eye level, as noted by one teacher and also the students.

In terms of the differences between the two educational systems, Daniel wrote in his reflective paper:

The students seem very unfamiliar with some of the Westernized teaching strategies that I have been implementing, yet most will keep at a task until they fully understand. Although the overall philosophy of teaching and learning in China was extremely different to what I have experienced in Australia, it is clear why it works in China. The big class sizes, frequent formal assessment and overall content of the curriculum that must be learnt, dictate a rote-based approach to teaching. (Daniel)

In reflecting on the different social and cultural approaches, Tim wrote:

What I observed in English learning and teaching was a heavy emphasis on grammar exercises and comprehension exercises, because most of the marks in the exams focused on this. I think cultural differences between Australia and China are very apparent when it comes to expectations of student performance. Pressure for high performance from parents, the school and society is reflected in students studying extremely hard. I think that to have a good understanding of the way schools work in China, including teaching methods and student behavior, you have to have a good understanding of Chinese culture. (Tim).

From the local teachers' point of view, the PSTs comments can be interpreted from another perspective. During the interview, teacher Wang talked about the major differences between the two systems.

The two cultures are very different. As I learnt from my overseas experience, the Australian approach is to develop through a learning environment of classroom activities and topic assignments. Ours are about completing a certain number of teaching objectives with a certain number of knowledge points in a lesson within a class. In the first lesson, Amanda organized a very good activity but it has consumed a lot of time. According to our evaluation criteria, it should be said that the teaching objectives have not been achieved in that class. (Wang)

Mrs Wang continued:

Although they are very strong in stimulating the learning interest of the students, to tell the truth, our teaching method is geared more towards getting good examination results. They emphasized the organizing of various classroom activities. Letting the children participate and be involved in the practice is no doubt a good idea, but it inevitably missed some knowledge points or, to put it in another way, examination points. The criteria to evaluate learning outcomes are quite different in the two systems ... after all, the English examination from junior high to enter senior high school does not involve a lot of listening and speaking skills. Their English proficiency, at the end, will be evaluated by answering written questions. No matter how good their oral English is, it cannot be demonstrated at the examination. After the student teachers left, I have had to supplement my students learning by individual knowledge aspects and what is to be tested in the examination. (Wang).

In this example the teacher explained that she had to do more after the PST left her classroom to prepare the students for the tests and this was therefore of some concern to her. If this happens often then it is possible that the teacher may not agree to having other students from Australia if it means more time and work required of teachers, or if their students don't attain the required skills to do well in their future tests.

In terms of the different educational concepts between the two systems, the children's answers to the survey questions was another way to provide meaningful perspective. In response to the question, "What do you like about the Australian teachers?" the Chinese students reported that the classes were:

Vivid, lively, rich, colorful and interesting, they do not follow one pattern and are not limited to teaching subject knowledge only

Her class made me feel relaxed without pressure

He was able to create an interactive classroom atmosphere, encourage us to participate actively. (Questionnaire responses from local students).

In commenting on 'the most impressive moments you remember from your learning with the Australian teachers', most children shared fond memories about the physical education class, the outdoor English classes and the idea that learning English can be a happy experience. They responded:

He took us to the playground which was the first outdoor English class I had in the past 7 years in school. I still remember the English words and expressions learned that day and they are hard to forget ...

I started to see English learning in a different way and started to be interested in English which was the subject I didn't like before.

She made me feel learning English could be an interesting and enjoyable thing.

I enjoyed the PE class he offered and played basketball with us as a team member. In the past 7 years of my schooling, no other teacher did that the same way except the PE teacher.

The outdoor English class was unique and a really special memory for me with a lot of fun, joy and laughing. (Questionnaire responses from local students)

In commenting on ways to improve the PSTs teaching, the children were honest and frank in expressing their opinions and also had many points in common with their teachers' comments.

I hope he can speak a bit of Chinese and can use Chinese materials and resources to explain the words or sentences that we didn't understand well.

I hope they can focus on subject-matter knowledge a bit more, especially the learning points for tests and examinations. I am concerned that their way was not necessarily able to improve my test scores which is very important for every one of us.

(Questionnaire responses from local students)

The above data from the three subject groups clearly indicated the considerable difference between the two educational systems in terms of educational expectations, perceptions of learning and teaching, teaching strategies and approaches, assessment and testing of students, classroom management and organization and flexible use of classroom spaces.

Examination-oriented education has long been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society. As the result, teachers tend to focus on academically promising students and rote learning dominates classroom teaching. Students are weighed down by excessive homework and examination pressure.

The pressure on students to succeed at school has been further exacerbated by the economic reforms and the increased stratification of society as well as the One Child Policy which has increased the weight of expectation on each child (Dello-Iacovo 2008, p.2).

The fact that students in Year 7 already have a good idea of what they are intending to do in their future careers is an example of the cultural values of the society. Consistent with the traditional Chinese cultural values, all parents and extended family members have high

expectations for the younger generation. It is easy to understand that educational achievement is a direct pathway to getting a good job and a high salary in the densely populated Chinese society where to access resources and opportunity is limited. Therefore the students are highly motivated in their learning with an educational system that has a strong emphasis on testing and examination results.

In today's Chinese education system there are two important examinations for students: (1) Entrance Examination from junior high to senior high school and (2) the Entrance Examination from senior high school to university. In practical terms the results of the Entrance Examinations are directly linked to schools status and students who do well in these exams gain admission to the superior senior high schools and universities. The success rates in these two examinations are used as the key standards for school evaluations, and the consequent flow of resources. (Hickey & Jin, 2010. Pp.22-23).

In fact, these examinations are widely seen as “the baton of education”. As a consequence, the promotion rates achieved through these examinations has become the key focus of school leaders, teachers, students and parents. These realities, coupled with the cultural desire for highly successful “dragon children” and the One Child Policy, have fuelled the already strong ambition of Chinese parents for their only child’s excellence in different level schools. Those cultural factors influence Chinese educational practice in school, and together with the big class sizes, highlight the deeply cultural nature of the pedagogy.

PSTs Reflections on Their Personal and Professional Development

All PSTs expressed that being part of an international professional experience placement was a valuable and a life changing experience for them as teachers in a modern society and as a global citizen in a complex world. All of the students reflected on the impact the experience had on their self-confidence as teachers and the desire to continue to learn and grow through this type of intercultural experience. Daniel wrote about his professional growth:

The biggest skill I have developed in Anshan is the ability to explain things non-verbally. My ability to cater for visual and kinesthetic learners in my future classrooms will be exponentially greater than previously. The most difficult aspect of working with both teachers and students in Anshan has been the linguistic and cultural barriers that I have encountered. When using a word or phrase they were unfamiliar with, I didn't have the advantage of being able to use Chinese language to explain myself, which the Chinese students and teachers did frequently with each other when there was a misunderstanding. It certainly forced me to develop non-verbal approaches to teaching that I have not focused on in the past, so I feel that this was a great learning experience. (Daniel)

In addition, Daniel wrote in his reflective paper:

I value the cultural exposure that I gained in China, both at school and in my extra-curricular activities, just as much as what I learned as a pre service teacher. I learnt that I should place higher expectations on students after seeing the amount of time and effort that students in China put into their education. Not only has my exposure to the work ethic of the Chinese encouraged me to expect more of students, but also of myself, as a professional and as a citizen of modern society. (Daniel)

Laura, also reflected on her professional learning and the learning she gained about communicating with students including varying ways of learning, when she wrote:

The important skill that I have brought back to Australia is an ability to re-communicate information in different ways when students don't first understand.

Although this was particularly noticeable in China because of the language difference I feel that this will be invaluable in the classroom in terms of explaining activities and learning items in different ways to appeal to students of all abilities and learning styles. I feel that my growth and further development of cultural understanding and awareness can help me with my teaching in Australian schools, particularly as Australia continues to become more and more culturally diverse. (Laura)

Amanda focused on another aspect of professional learning when she wrote about teaching English as second language,

I enjoyed this placement more than any other I did in Australian schools and the change of environment has changed me for the better for the rest of my life both socially and professionally. The professional development I have experienced improved my skills to teach English as a second language confidently; this is something I would not have been able to experience in an Australian school. I am now able to teach English as second language students in more appropriate ways through the experience and practice I have had during this placement. (Amanda)

The international professional experience for Australian PSTs in China revealed considerable differences in educational concepts and teaching strategies between the two that is related to the very different social, political and cultural contexts. While the Australian PSTs demonstrated new ways to plan, organize and experience learning and speaking the English language to the Chinese teachers and students, some students actually spoke English verbally in classes that they had not previously felt able to do. The Australian PSTs were impressed by the Chinese children's intelligence, hard work, self-discipline and learning potential as well as the Chinese teachers' commitment and focused approach to their teaching. The local mentor teachers emphasized that they also learned important understandings from the Australian student teachers while supervising their teaching and learnt more about their own students learning by being able to stand back and observe their students more and by being involved in different learning approaches such as peer group cooperative learning alongside the Australian PSTs. The findings indicated that the Chinese professional experience enriched the Australian PSTs professional and personal lives, enhanced their confidence as a teacher in diverse educational settings and their cross cultural communication skills. The experiences of the PSTs professional learning in China also had implications for the learning enhancements for all the teachers involved as well as engaging the Chinese students in thinking about and reflecting on their own learning.

Implications and Conclusions

Findings from this study reveal the value of Australian PSTs learning through diverse multicultural experiences in a setting such as China. The ability to adapt to new cultural situations and to teach using different approaches are important professional skills that teachers need to understand and be able to enact in today's complex and changing world. The importance of using forms of non-verbal communication more positively as a teacher was also highly valued by the PSTs and student participants in this study. Most criticism came from the mentor teachers because the PSTs were not spending sufficient teaching time on specific knowledge that would be relevant to the Chinese tests and examinations. The English tests are written rather than spoken English, and it was the speaking of English that the PSTs were doing so successfully according to the teacher's observations and students comments.

Another important element in the learning of the PSTs was that the experiences broadened their global perspectives and ideas of global citizenship. As a part of this learning the PSTs could begin to understand distinctive working conditions in diverse cultural settings, both the work of teachers and the employment conditions in the two societies.

The Chinese teachers reported that they had time and space to observe the Australian PSTs teaching their own students so they could see their students learning potential in a new light when they were being taught by the PSTs. This is a crucial conclusion in terms of how such experiences enriched both the local Chinese teachers and their own students. This aspect would be extremely worthwhile to develop in other diverse schools and cultural settings, as professional learning for classroom teachers is an important element of understanding and improving teachers' ways of working.

The confidence of the PTSs as well as the confidence of the local students was well developed through these learning experiences. As we highlighted previously, one teacher said: *'Every child in my class now dares to open their mouth to speak English. It is the greatest success from my point of view'*. This is a major advance if the children were not speaking in English in their regular English classes. From the local student perspective, the highlights were that the PSTs did not 'blame' them for making mistakes but rather encouraged them to learn in different ways. The lessons were also seen as happy and joyful experiences and there was a sense of humor that made the learning enjoyable.

These conclusions are suggestive of a need to do more in teacher education to ensure PSTs are classroom ready, able to communicate cross culturally and to manage and engage with cultural diversity in their teaching. These PSTs engaged in critical reflection, analyzed their assumptions and understandings about diversity and intercultural communication and contributed in multiple ways to the Chinese students and teachers learning in the process.

Further research on the student responses and reactions to having PSTs teaching them in their classrooms in multicultural and multilingual settings would give more information on ways to develop such global teacher education experiences further and to enhance the benefits for the supervising teacher, the PSTs and the students in the classroom. Listening to the voices of the students is an essential part of learning to become a successful teacher.

Teacher education programs need to develop innovative ways to enable pre-service teachers to understand and develop skills and abilities in cultural diversity, intercultural communication, empathy, aptitudes for working collaboratively and networking across cultures and interacting with people of different social and cultural backgrounds. In this way, teacher education programs, classroom teachers and students will be able to gain knowledge of global issues and universal values and act collaboratively to work towards global citizenship education to build a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.

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