

'We were the real teacher': Outcomes of an international practicum in the Solomon Islands for Australian preservice teachers

Renata Cinelli

Australian Catholic University, Australia: renata.cinelli@acu.edu.au

Mellita Jones

Australian Catholic University, Australia: mellita.jones@acu.edu.au

International teaching experiences are touted as an opportunity for preservice teachers (PSTs) to grow both personally and professionally, including increased cultural awareness, self-efficacy, independence, and enhanced key teaching attributes. The study reported in this paper explores the outcomes of a four-week international practicum in the Solomon Islands for Australian undergraduate primary PSTs. Survey responses of 27 PSTs who undertook placement in 2014, 2015 or 2016, in either an urban K-12 Catholic school or a rural K-6 primary school in the Solomon Islands are reported. Findings indicate that participants experienced substantial development in teacher identity, classroom confidence, cultural understanding, and in their strategies for supporting students who speak English as an additional language. PSTs also reported that their worldview was impacted as a result of their exposure to this Global South Country. The minimal resources, limited access to education, and general lack of privilege in the Solomon Islands contrasted to their Australian context. The implications of these findings, in regard to the responsiveness of teacher education in engaging PSTs in this more global-focused education, are also considered.

Keywords: International practicum; International field experience; teacher education; Solomon Islands; small state; cross-cultural competency; global education

INTRODUCTION

In a period of increasing criticism about the quality of teacher education, universities globally are seeking ways to innovate teacher education programs and demonstrate the quality of their graduates. One area of innovation that is only marginally explored as a strategy for improving the quality of teacher education is the use of international practicum experiences in the Global South World (also referred to as 'developing' countries). As a strategy that is also likely to have significant benefits for the host country, it is appropriate to investigate the potential of such an approach to enhancing outcomes of teacher education. This paper explores one such approach, and reports specifically on the outcomes for the preservice teachers (PSTs) involved.

Cushner and Mahon (2002) argue that globalization demands internationally literate teachers and that 'immersion experiences in cultures other than one's own' (p. 44) are

essential. Providing opportunities for PSTs to ‘go global’, with the correct support, can have profound transformative personal and professional positive impacts (Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, & Lundahl, 2014). In particular, positive impacts can include increased cultural awareness and understanding of diversity; improved self-efficacy; and development of key teaching characteristics (Kabilan, 2013; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). Further, programs through which PSTs undertake practicum in contexts socio-culturally different to their own have been identified as opportunities to confront their ethnocentric world views and construct understanding of the ways in which culture (and context) influence teaching and learning (Marx & Moss, 2011). This allows PSTs to develop a nuanced understanding of the influence of culture on learning (Dunn et al., 2014) as well as gain the shifts in awareness and attitude about how the western way of life impacts people of the Global South World; a significant area to address in working towards a more equitable and sustainable world.

Malewski and Phillion (2009) discuss the implications of gains arising from cross-cultural international teaching experiences. They suggest that cultural learning leads to increased openness towards students who are female, bi- or multi-lingual, or whose cultural background differs from the majority. They further report that PSTs feel more capable of differentiating between cultural attributes and learning disabilities, better understand what it feels like to be an outsider, and are more willing to differentiate teaching to meet diverse learning needs. Other studies confirm that enhanced cultural competence, greater appreciation and respect for difference, and reduced likelihood of prejudice based on cultural background, are key outcomes of international cross-cultural placement experiences (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). In the Australian context, where one in four Australians is born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), and culture, race, and religious affiliations are rapidly diversifying, graduate teachers are expected to be ‘responsive to the needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds’ (AITSL, 2014). Hence, cross-cultural capabilities that are enhanced through international practicums are critical for successful and quality teaching.

Another benefit of international teaching placements is their reported link to increased confidence, improved self-efficacy, and meaningful professional development (Kabilan, 2013; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). Pence and Macgillivray (2008) report that PSTs learnt how to handle difficult situations and had more confidence in their abilities to manage their own classrooms following their international teaching experience. Kabilan (2013) discusses that these increases in confidence and competence arise from the necessity PSTs face to apply skills, devise solutions, make decisions, and deal with problems that engage energy, creativity, and inventiveness when in these settings.

Cushner and Mahon (2002) suggest that international teaching experience and subsequent cultural (and broader) learning enable PSTs to form a view of education and classrooms that transcend beyond the normal student teaching experience. They say:

It is essential, especially in these interdependent, global times, that preservice teachers experience cross-cultural learning to gain a deeper understanding of the world in which they live and to enable them to teach with, work with, and continue to learn from people different to themselves. (p. 55)

While these considerations make university agendas for international teaching experience understandable, partnerships for international placements also serve local, in-country

agendas. This notion is considered further in the next section, which looks at the context of the Solomon Islands, where the international placement reported in this paper took place.

THE SOLOMON ISLANDS CONTEXT

The Solomon Islands is an archipelago consisting of almost 1000 islands (SINSO, 2009), with a population of approximately 642,000 (SINSO, 2015). The archipelago is in the bottom 25 per cent of the poorest countries in the world (United Nations, 2015) and, due to its population, is classified as a small state (Brock & Crossley, 2013). As with many small states, the Solomon Islands span a large geographic area and face many challenges in delivering school and teacher education. Ensuring universal access to quality education is one of the key objectives of The National Development Strategy (NDS) for 2011-2020 (DIMF-AP, 2014), yet progress has been slow and reported as insufficient in the Solomon Islands (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2015).

In the Solomon Islands, only 64.4 per cent of the primary school teachers have completed some form of teacher education and, in the majority of cases, this is limited to a one-year certificate (MEHRD, 2014). In comparison, in Australia, teacher training consists of a minimum four year Bachelor degree or an undergraduate degree and a two-year Masters level qualification. One way our Solomon Islands partners attempt to deal with their relative disadvantage is through the hosting of international PSTs. Engaging Australian PSTs in their schools is viewed as an opportunity to access resources and interact with the PSTs who bring a rich wealth of experience based on their education and teacher education experiences in Australia.

The establishment of international partnerships such as the one we report here provides an opportunity for countries in circumstances similar to those of the Solomon Islands to address their own distinctive needs and educational priorities. Considering the positive outcomes reported to date, in what is, so far, only a small number of studies in this field of research, it is important to extend the investigation of international experiences to examine the different forms it may take and the respective outcomes obtained. While these outcomes are important to consider from both the Australian PSTs' perspective and that of the in-service Solomon Islander teachers, this particular paper is focused on the former. Ongoing research that investigates the outcomes specific to in-service teacher participants will be reported in future papers. These findings are important given that the Solomon Islands is a region of the world that has not previously featured in the international practicum literature as a placement location.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, single-case study methodology was adopted for this study. Qualitative research is concerned with personal experiences and involves data about 'what people do and say' (Habib, Pathik, & Maryam, 2014, p. 9). As such, qualitative research aligns with the aims of this study, which sought PST's perspectives about their Solomon Island's international placement and how these fit with the aims of the program to influence PSTs' personal and professional attributes. As Habib et al. (2014) report, qualitative research generally utilizes small samples, has broad, open questioning, is descriptive in its purpose and subjective in its interpretation. These attributes also align with the parameters around the present study.

An increasingly common form of qualitative research is that of case-study methodology (Yin, 2014). Case study research is:

...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (Yin, 2014, p. 16)

Yin's definition is particularly fitting in describing the situation in which this study occurred. The Solomon Islands context and the phenomenon of experiencing an international practicum placement in the Solomon Islands inextricably linked the context and phenomenon being studied. This link made the boundaries between context and phenomenon difficult, if not impossible, to define. Moreover, case study often involves multiple sources of data, often collected regularly over a period of time (Yin, 2014). As noted earlier, this was also the case for the present study, which involved data collection at the end of each year's program between 2014 and 2016.

Context and background

The Solomon Islands International Practicum is a five-week program that has been running through the National School of Education of Australian Catholic University since 2009 with numbers increasing from six PSTs in 2009 to 20 PSTs in 2016. The program involves the immersion of PSTs in the local school and broader community including an experience of daily life and culture. The five-week program includes four weeks of teaching placement in either an urban Catholic K-12 school, or a rural government primary school (K-6) with PSTs assuming almost full classroom control from day one. The PSTs are allocated classes based on their grade preferences and prior experience, and they work with their PST peers and local Solomon Islander in-service teachers (Associate Teachers) to plan for teaching. The PSTs are given a great deal of independence and autonomy, with the local teachers providing contextual expertise associated with cultural norms, language, and support in understanding students' individual needs.

Beyond the classroom, the practicum incorporates visits to a range of landmarks and island villages. PSTs live in accommodation of a standard commensurate with that of the local teachers with whom they work. This immersion in the life and culture of both the school and broader community contributes significantly to the PSTs' understanding of the lives of the Solomon Islands peoples and plays a significant role in affecting their worldview.

To enter the program, PSTs undertake a competitive application and selection process. Once selected, they participate in induction sessions that cover cultural expectations (e.g. culturally appropriate clothing, behaviour, gender roles, etc.), professional and personal expectations, resources and planning, first aid, and other matters. These sessions help to ensure preparedness and reduce the potential risk of culture shock.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from PSTs post-placement through an online open-ended survey. Questions focused on expectations, learning about the school, children, school staff, culture, curriculum, challenges encountered, and personal and professional growth. A section for additional comments unbounded by specific questions was also included.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Patterns and themes were identified and coded, then re-examined and coding refined. In a way similar to that described by Patton

'We were the real teachers'

(2002), codes were used to elicit recurring and emerging themes. Also similar to other research (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001), data were reported under the identified themes.

Participants

Participants were third-year undergraduate primary PSTs from Australian Catholic University. A total of 44 PSTs participated in the program across a three-year period (2014 n=10; 2015 n=14; 2016 n=20). Participants were provided with an information statement and had opportunities to ask questions. An online consent form and questionnaire were distributed via email. All data collection occurred post-practicum and only the project officer had access to consent forms. This helped to protect participant identity and to remove potential conflict of interest, given the researchers were also the accompanying lecturers in the program. Twenty-seven (61%) PSTs consented to participate in the study: 2014 n=5 (50%); 2015 n=11 (79%); 2016 n=11 (55%).

Author's positionality and ethics

Both researchers were involved in the program as the recruiting and the in-country supervising staff for the full duration of time in the Solomon Islands. As Australian women with several consecutive years of experience with this and other engagements with the Solomon Islands (experience ranging from 3-9 years) we have an inherent understanding of the placement experience, the cultural context, and the school context. However, we were still mindful of our White, academic backgrounds as we worked with and interpreted experiences set within the Indigenous Melanesian culture that is significantly different from our own. The previous years' experience in the Solomon Islands and the close relationships established and maintained over almost a decade has built trust and openness between us and the local school community, which helps to provides a level of confidence in the accuracy of interpretation of the culture and events that occurred, although these may still be limited due to the cultural differences.

Being inherently involved in the program and research creates potential bias. Pence and Macgillivray (2008) explain, being so close to the experience (living with, getting to know, and sharing experiences with the PSTs) comes with its own set of complexities, particularly when aiming to remain unbiased in data analysis. While our experience and proximity to the data is an advantage in understanding and reading it, we were also aware of potential bias that could exist in inferences made. To minimize this risk, we examined the data separately before discussing the findings together (inter-rater reliability) and collected and examined three years of data separately before deciding it could be collapsed and treated as a single data set. Research ethics approval was obtained from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project V2011_130).

RESULTS

The results are outlined according to five key themes that emerged through data analysis. These themes are: 1) Development of teacher identity (PST autonomy and confidence); 2) Cultural competence; 3) In-service teacher learning; 4) Overcoming challenges; and 5) Influence on global worldview. Responses within each theme, including those in which challenges were identified, demonstrated that the outcomes of the program were ubiquitously positive. This positivity was expressed through responses characterised by: 'I have grown a great deal' (PST 1, 2016); 'This has shaped me as a person' (PST 2,

2016); and ‘I learnt that I am incredibly fortunate in my life’ (PST 1, 2014). Other responses commensurate with these were pervasive and showed the general positive influence of the experience on PSTs’ personal and professional life. The specific thematic areas identified in the data analysis are reported in greater detail below.

Development of teacher identity (PST autonomy and confidence)

‘This has shaped the future teacher that I will be and want to be’ (PST 3, 2015). This comment epitomizes the feelings of many of the PSTs in the study regarding the establishment of their teacher identities derived from their placement.

The placement provided an opportunity for full-classroom control, which contrasted to participants’ prior placement experiences in Australian schools. Hence, PSTs needed to make decisions, plan, and respond to all situations as they arose throughout the school day. This autonomy meant that the PSTs learnt about what was ‘right’ for them as a person and as a teacher. In reflecting on the experience, PSTs explained how ‘the autonomy made me a better teacher’ (PST 1, 2014) and that ‘it was tough at times, but I’m proud of how I taught’ (PST 5, 2015). An elaborated comment encapsulates how this autonomy, and the resultant responsibility impacted on them and their teacher identity:

In Aus, you know you are teaching, but it’s artificial in that the kids and parents know that you are not their 'real teacher' and that you are just there for a little bit of time before the real teacher takes over. During this round, I was shocked that my Associate Teacher just handed over the class and said that I could do whatever I liked. We were entrusted with the whole program while we were there. We were the 'real teacher'. The children treated us like it, and as a result we had to step up even more than we would have done on an Australian placement. (PST 11, 2015)

The decision making, adaptability, thinking on the spot and overall control meant that PSTs had to ‘back themselves’ in what they were doing. One explained: ‘I learnt that I was able to cope with more than I ever thought I would be able’ (PST 6, 2016). This type of experience of coping and managing in such difficult circumstances – both physically and emotionally – helped them to develop confidence in their teaching and a belief in their own capabilities.

Across all three years, PST cohorts expressed that the practicum reaffirmed their desire to be a teacher, and/or their desire to teach in contrasting cultural settings similar to what they experienced in the Solomon Islands. This desire was represented by comments such as: ‘[The experience] made me love teaching so much more’ (PST 5, 2015); and ‘[It] reinforced my desire and passion to become a primary school teacher (PST 11, 2016).

Cultural competence

Increased cultural knowledge also emerged as one of the main outcomes of the placement for the PSTs. This included advanced knowledge of cultural differences, and cultural nuances that manifest in the students’ behaviour. Many also commented on the extent to which they learnt culture influences and shapes learning, including cultural influences on general behaviours, for example: ‘It was very hard to get answers and suggestions out of them [students] while trying to have class discussions and interactive learning’ (PST 10, 2015). This comment undoubtedly arose from the experience of Solomon Island children who, culturally, tend to be very shy, do not like individual attention on themselves, and are highly sensitive to non-verbal communication is prevalent (e.g., raising eyebrows to indicate approval and/or agreement).

'We were the real teachers'

The relationship between the experience and developing cultural competence was further reflected in the comments participants made about their enhanced ability to teach children for whom English was an additional rather than a native language. Solomon Islands have around 200 different languages. Children typically speak a number of languages including: their native language (mother tongue) – sometimes that of both their maternal and paternal ancestors; Pijin, the local lingua franca; and then English as a third, fourth or even later-acquired language. The opportunity to work with children in these circumstances was seen as a significant benefit because, through necessity, PSTs learnt to extend their communication skills and adapt their teaching to suit the students' language needs. One PST explained:

This was my first true experience at teaching EAL/D students and I have a stronger respect for EAL/D teachers, as the students in my class were very shy and lacked confidence to practice their English skills . . . [this] presented me with a rich chance to engage in previously unfamiliar experiences. (PST 11, 2016)

There were also reports of PST's learning to read body language and come to recognise the power of non-verbal forms of communication. They learnt to observe and interpret the behaviours and interactions of different people, and how these related to the cultural and social mores that exist in the Solomon Islands. One PST captured this in her comment:

Working with children and teachers with a completely different culture and language has impacted greatly on my communication skills and has made me better at understanding and analysing body language. (PST 3, 2016)

While cultural knowledge does not have to be developed through an international experience like this, participants indicated that the extent of their learning was enriched through cultural immersion. For example:

I've always known that every culture is different, however after this experience I was able to really engage myself and interact with a culture completely different from my own. (PST 5, 2014)

The Solomon Islands experience extended PSTs' understanding of social circumstance and poverty, which contributed to the empathy and care PSTs had for their students. For example, PST 10 (2015) suggested the experience was very eye opening [because] Solomon Island's culture is very different to Australian culture and PSTs observed things that would not happen in Australia, like the fact that many children never wore shoes, many came late to class (PST 10, 2015). Another key example of this came from a 2014 participant, a recent graduate and employed teacher. She stated:

Culture has a huge impact on learning, and how students learn . . . [and] teachers need to be aware of different cultural nuances in order to successfully teach . . . I notice now that I am working as a teacher that I have a lot more of an awareness and understanding than many of my colleagues. (PST 1, 2014)

This helps to show how the learning can transfer beyond the experience and into the profession.

In-service teacher learning

Throughout the placement, PSTs came to understand that teacher training is simple and extremely short in the Solomon Islands (PST 1, 2015) and that, compared to the Solomon Islands, Australia's initial teacher education was markedly different to that afforded to

the local Solomon Islander teachers. PST 8 (2015) described this difference from her perspective:

Even comparing the teaching between Australia and the school we attended, our teachers are taught about pedagogy and how to teach students to get the best out of them, whereas in the Solomons they are only taught the content. (PST 8, 2015)

Specifically, the difference in initial teacher education experiences meant the Australian PSTs were able to model student-centred pedagogies that Solomon Islander teachers are being called to use in place of the academic and teacher directed pedagogies that have been traditional in the region (PEDF, 2009). This notion was elaborated further by PST 11 (2015), who explained how the Solomon Islands teachers exhibited a level of respect for PST knowledge that was unusual compared to what would be experienced at this stage of the course in Australia:

The staff . . . (unfortunately) were not given the same opportunities as we were to go to uni to seek a higher education in order to become a teacher. They cared and respected us greatly and that they actually valued OUR teaching knowledge more than their own (which as a 3rd year is a strange – somewhat intimidating – feeling). (PST 11, 2015)

Hence, the majority of the PSTs recognized that the local teachers viewed the presence of the PSTs as an opportunity for professional development, and a chance to work collaboratively to increase their own skills and knowledge. For instance:

The staff were keen to learn . . . My teacher took notes on my classes so he could implement some of the strategies I was using, they were very interested in sharing ideas and gaining knowledge. As my teacher told me, his class was now 'our' class. All the teachers were very helpful and supportive, providing any assistance required. However they did sit back and let us run their class and lessons. (PST 8, 2015)

The willingness to learn exhibited by the in-service teachers, and the expectation to have your supervising teacher learn from you (PST 1, 2014) was recognised as markedly different from practicum experiences in Australia. This experience fostered a sense amongst PST participants that they needed to 'step up' more than they would on an Australian placement.

Overcoming challenges

Limited resources, large class sizes, homesickness and interactions with fellow PSTs were the most frequently cited challenges. Although, the majority of the participants suggested that hindsight enabled them to view the challenges they experienced as positive because it was through facing and overcoming them that the most learning and growth took place. This was reflected in the comment of one PST who stated that 'the challenges only helped build on me as a person' (PST 4, 2015).

A common challenge highlighted by nearly all PST participants was related to the distinct lack of teaching resources available in Solomon Islands schools, particularly compared to most Australian schools. PSTs suggested that these restrictions increased their creativity and resourcefulness when it came to planning lessons. They also expressed a belief that this creativity and resourcefulness would benefit them in other contexts. For example:

'We were the real teachers'

This experience really shaped me as a teacher as I learnt about the importance of creating ideas with limited resources as you never know what situation or classroom you are going to be placed in. (PST 5, 2014)

Trying to find ways of conducting engaging lessons using minimal resources. Many activities had to be done using basic pen and paper, meaning I had to use a great deal of ingenuity to come up with activities that were enjoyable and relevant to the class. (PST 2, 2014)

Large class sizes were also cited as a significant challenge: 'teaching 40 plus students was exhausting and draining and I began to lose my voice' (PST 1, 2015). This sentiment was echoed by all the PSTs who taught in the lower years in particular, where language barriers were more prominent amongst younger students and the large class sizes exacerbated this issue.

Experiencing a feeling of homesickness and the extended period of time spent living with fellow PSTs were also cited as challenges for about half of the respondents. Students were constantly together over the five weeks of the program, and this tended to 'inflare social and/or professional tensions because there was no real release' (PST 1, 2014). Some respondents indicated they were able to work through the bumps along the way. Others expressed that, while some challenges were difficult to deal with at the time, upon reflection they could see that these experiences would assist them in the future.

Influence on global worldview

An effect on worldview became evident during the program as PSTs began to identify and describe the Australian way of life as being materialistic and individualistic. Many of the comments from PSTs indicated an appreciation of the social connectedness they witnessed and recognized as key to Solomon Island's culture and lifestyle. PST 8 (2015) encapsulated this:

I learnt that to be happy you don't need materialistic things, you need friends and family. You need to be a part of a community and support network. This . . . showed me how thankful and giving people can be. (PST 8, 2015)

Understanding how access to education was viewed as a privilege and an opportunity in the Solomon Islands also became apparent. For example:

It was a place where everyone felt really lucky to be. The students were incredibly grateful for their education and the opportunities that it presented. (PST 1, 2014)

I learnt that education is the key to success in life. Every child turned up to school and they knew it was a privilege to be there and they all wanted to be something. (PST 4, 2014)

This insight into the way in which education was viewed as a privilege in the Solomon Islands led the PSTs to recognise and to feel grateful for the opportunities they have in Australia. 'I feel like I have a new appreciation for life and for the things I take for granted' (PST 2, 2016) is just one comment highlighting the sentiments expressed by many.

Participants expressed a need to be more appreciative. They identified that they have too many 'things'; and they conveyed an increased understanding of what is important and what is irrelevant in life. Several communicated that the experience made them sense things they took for granted in Australia 'may never be possible in the Solomon Islands'

(PST 4, 2016). One PST really captured the essence of the comments representing such a stance:

I think this experience really allowed me to appreciate the life I, and most Australians, live. It made me really acknowledge how great our education system really is, and made me want to fight for change in countries such as the Solomon Islands, which has a drastically lower social status than us. My personal growth was substantial. I was able to grow not only as a teacher but as a person in general. I was able to recognise and acknowledge how many people around the world do live, and it made me realise how lucky I really am, and how my life, especially education, should not be taken for granted. (PST 10, 2016)

Possibly one of the most poignant realisations of the participants, centred around acknowledging the concept of White privilege, something that had been invisible to many of them prior to their Solomon Islands experience. Through reflection on their personal experience they were able to realize ‘the impact that skin colour has in the way you are treated within the world’ (PST 6, 2015).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support previous research (e.g., Kaliban, 2013; Parr, 2012; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008) that show the generally positive outcomes of international practicum experiences for PST participants. Positive outcomes are evidenced for both PST personal and professional growth, particularly in regard to their cultural awareness, self-efficacy, and teaching capabilities. In this way, the study reported here helps to support evidence and literature that promotes international practicum for the particular success it has in influencing these aspects of PSTs’ personal and professional identities.

As with some other studies about international practicum, particularly when the host country has a significantly different culture (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Malewski & Phillion, 2009), we evidenced that the Solomon Islands teaching immersion helped to strengthen PSTs’ understanding and awareness of the importance of culture for successful teaching and learning. One example of the longitudinal benefits of this was seen in the graduate teacher participant who reported having an increased sense of the importance of culture that she was readily able to accommodate in her planning. What was most poignant about her contribution here was her observation that she seemed more readily able to cater for this sort of diversity than her (established) teacher colleagues.

PSTs also reported growth in communication skills, particularly in their ability to ‘read’ and sense the needs and moods of children in the learning environment. This arose from their experience of teaching in large classrooms with children from a predominantly non-verbal culture in which body language and facial movements were key forms of communication. Exposed to increased forms of non-verbal communication, exacerbated by low English language levels, PSTs could not rely on spoken language to the extent they were used to. They had to learn to read their children’s needs through the individual and group behaviours exhibited. This unique form of learning made them more sensitive and more receptive to a wider range of communication styles.

Another finding from our study that again aligns with some others (e.g., Kaliban, 2013), relates to PSTs’ increased confidence and identity formation as a teacher. We were the ‘real’ teachers said one PST, conveying their sense that this is not nearly as strongly developed in the practicum setting of Australian schools. General concerns about

practicum have identified an issue around the way in which PSTs feel obliged to adopt the style of their supervising classroom teacher rather than establish their own teaching identity (Maynard, 2001). In our program, the Solomon Islander teachers saw the PSTs as teachers, and their behaviour towards them reflected this.

Identity is as much about developing a belief of who we are, as it is a belief about how others see us (Danielewicz, 2014). As such, it is easy to see how the experience of being treated as a 'real' teacher, helped to accelerate our PSTs' ability to see themselves as teachers. While the notion of identity and identity formation are dynamic, complex and ill-defined (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), there is universal agreement that the formation of a teacher identity is important if teachers are to be successful, agentic, and professional (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005), and it appears that this particular international practicum provided the circumstances that fostered such an outcome.

The influence of undertaking international practicum in the Global South on these PSTs is something reasonably unique that this study offers. These circumstances appeared to influence the worldview of PST participants, who all conveyed some sort of changed perspective of the life they lead. Many comments centred on taking 'basic' things, like education and access to fresh water, for granted. Some noted that they had never really seen these things as privileges before. A number also reported feeling a sense of materialism, consumerism and individualism as negative attributes of the Australian lifestyle. They noted that, even though they lived with pervasive poverty and lack of opportunity, Solomon Islands people were generally happier and more connected to one another than what they witnessed and experienced in the Australian culture. This was transformational for PSTs and how they viewed their own and others' lives.

Anecdotally, and in conjunction with the reported observations of our PSTs, in-service Solomon Island teachers see the partnership we have established as an opportunity to access valuable professional learning. As noted earlier, Solomon Islands, like many small states, experience significant disadvantage in the provision of equitable access to education across the archipelago and teachers face challenges in access to pre- and in-service teacher education opportunities when compared to Global North World countries. In-country experience,s such as the one reported here, play a role in supporting local agendas to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

So what are the implications for ongoing research and for teacher education? We see this study as supporting others in advocating for cross-cultural professional practicum experiences within teacher education courses. From what we have learned from almost a decade of running this program in the Solomon Islands, coupled with what we have read about international practicum, we are confident that the learning potential is particularly strong when international placements occur in Global South World contexts. The Global South World context (particularly given we were from a Global North context) was highly influential in the level of learning about culture, planning, and teaching for diversity, and for the fostering of teacher identity. Moreover, we believe that there is significant potential for Global South World teaching experiences to influence the worldviews of PSTs, which we hope will transcend PSTs' ongoing lives and subsequently influence what and how they teach once they enter the profession. This has enormous potential to shift the individualistic and short-sighted understandings and actions of many in Global

North World contexts; actions that lead to many local and global issues such as sense of community and the existence and impact of privilege and poverty. We see this aspect, as well as the professional learning potential for in-country teachers of small states, where teacher education is in its relative infancy, as key areas for future research. This research is currently underway to elicit the extent of the value and impact of this partnership for Solomon Islander teachers and students.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the difficulty we have had in condensing the wealth of information our PSTs have shared with us through this study, and attest that this paper follows what one of our PST participants communicated: ‘This . . . provides but a needle head’s view of what was a mountainous experience’ (PST 2, 2014).

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2012). 2011 *Census reveals one in four Australians is born overseas*. Retrieved from <http://abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/CO-59>
- AITSL. (2014). *Australian professional standards for teachers*. Australia: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list?c=graduate>
- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 175-189.
- Brock, C., & Crossley, M. (2013). Revisiting scale, comparative research and education in small states. *Comparative Education*, 49, 388–403. doi: 10.1080/03050068.2013.803782
- Cushner, K., & Mahon, J. (2002). Overseas student teaching: Affecting personal, professional, and global competencies in an age of globalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 6(1), 44-58.
- Danielewicz, J. (2014). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy, and teacher education*. New York: SUNY Press.
- DIMF-AP (Department International Monetary Fund Asia and Pacific). (2014). *Staff Country Reports: Solomon Islands: Staff Report for the 2013 Article IV consultation and Second Review under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement and Request for Modification of Performance Criterion*. Washington, US: International Monetary Fund.
- Dunn, A. H., Dotson, E. K., Cross, S. B., Kesner, J., & Lundahl, B. (2014). Reconsidering the local after a transformative global experience: A comparison of two study abroad programs for preservice teachers. *Action in Teacher Education*, 36(4), 283-304.
- Graziano, A., & Raulin, M. (2013). *Research methods: A process of inquiry (8th ed.)*. Harlow, England: Pearson.

'We were the real teachers'

- Habib, M., Pathik, B., & Maryam, H. (2014). *Research methodology: Contemporary practices: Guidelines for academic researchers*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (2005). How teachers learn and develop. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 358–389). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kabilan, M. (2013). A phenomenological study of an international teaching practicum: Pre-service teachers' experiences of professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 36, 198-209.
- Malewski, E., & Phillion, J. (2009). International field experiences: The impact of class, gender and race on the perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(1), 52-60.
- Marx, H., & Moss, D. (2011). Please mind the culture gap: Intercultural development during a teacher education study abroad program. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(1), 35-47.
- Maynard, T. (2001). The student teacher and the school community of practice: A consideration of 'learning as participation'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(1), 39–52.
- MEHRD (Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development). (2014). *Performance assessment report 2010-2014*. Retrieved from <http://www.mehrd.gov.sb/documents>
- Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. (2015). *2015 Pacific regional MDGs tracking report*. Retrieved from <http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/embeds/file/2015%20Pacific%20Regional%20MDGs%20Tracking%20Report.pdf>
- Parr, G. (2012). Leading an international teaching practicum: Negotiating tensions in a site of border pedagogy. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 97–109.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- PEFD. (2009). *Pacific education development framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.forumsec.org/pages.cfm/strategic-partnerships-coordination/education/>
- Pence, H., & Macgillivray, I. (2008). The impact of an international field experience on preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1), 14-25.
- SINSO (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office). (2009). *2009 Population and housing census National Report* (Vol. 2). Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/recinelli/Downloads/2009_Census_National-Report-Vol1.pdf.
- SINSO (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office). (2015). *Solomon Islands 2012/13 Household income and expenditure survey national analytical report* (Vol. 1). Honiara, Solomon Islands: Ministry of Finance and Treasury.

United Nations. (2015). The UN list of least developed countries. Retrieved from <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/ALDC/Least%20Developed%20Countries/UN-list-of-Least-Developed-Countries.aspx>

Willard-Holt, C. (2001). The impact of a short-term international experience for preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(4), 505-517.

Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.