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“Voices on the ground”: Solomon Islands teachers’ perceptions of hosting an Australian pre-service teacher education program

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ABSTRACT

There is scant representation of the outcomes of international teaching experiences from the perspective of host teachers despite a growing number of these sorts of programs. Addressing this gap, we conducted focus group interviews with 21 Solomon Islands teachers/school leaders regarding their experiences hosting Australian pre-service teachers in their schools. Findings revealed a range of program benefits, challenges, and some suggestions for improvement, and overall showed the value of these types of programs for host country teachers. However, given the popularity of international study programs as an internationalisation strategy in higher education in Global North countries, and the likelihood of these programs to involve previously colonised, developing countries, the study’s findings are important from an ethical standpoint, to explore potential colonising influences and power relations that may arise. As such, this study has implications for how international immersion programs should be planned and enacted to ameliorate potential.

1. Introduction

This study explores the perceptions of Solomon Islander teachers regarding an Australian initial teacher education program running in their schools. At the time of the study, the program was in its eighth year of running in one host school, and in its first year in a second host school. Each year, a different group of Australian pre-service teachers (PSTs) taught in primary school classrooms of host schools for a four-week period. The goals of the program were to enhance the personal and professional learning of PSTs and local teachers, and to develop inter-cultural awareness and communication skills.

What is clear from the literature available, is that most studies into PST international immersion programs focus on the outcomes for PSTs through a Western education lens. In this paper, we focus on the outcomes for Solomon Islander teachers, and use a lens from development theory that privileges the voice of in-country hosts. We believe this focus is important given relatively recent (prior to Covid-19) internationalisation agendas amongst higher education institutions in the Western world (De Wit & Altbach, 2021), which are beginning to resume with the re-opening of international borders. In Australia, the federal government’s New Colombo Plan funding scheme supporting undergraduate student mobility targets 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade DFAT, 2024). Of these countries, 36 have a history of European colonisation and almost three quarters are ranked

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below the world average on the [United Nations Development Program's \[UNDP\] \(2022\)](#) human development index. Underpinning structural and power inequalities between host and visiting country participants has been cited as a concern with international programs ([Tiessen, 2018](#)) due to risks of “colonisation, re-colonisation and/or neocolonisation” ([Tight, 2022](#), p. 252). Hence, there is an ethical imperative to investigate the outcomes for host countries. As such, we aim to explore the perceived benefits and challenges of the Australian PST international practicum experience in Solomon Islands from the perspective of host country teachers, thus addressing the research question:

What benefits and challenges do Solomon Islands host teachers identify from an Australian international professional experience placement occurring in their school/classroom?

2. Background literature

Within teacher education, international immersion programs are thought to develop PSTs competence, efficacy, empathy, and resilience in working with people from diverse cultures ([Ateşkan, 2016](#); [Cushner, 2007](#); [Klein & Wikan, 2019](#)). These experiences are also touted for their effectiveness in developing PSTs' understanding of how cultural background influences children's learning so they may adapt their teaching accordingly ([Davies, 2017](#); [Kabilan, 2013](#)). These sorts of skills are essential in today's multi-cultural classrooms ([Yemini et al., 2019](#)) where the political catchcries of “no child left behind” ([USA Congress, 2002](#)) and “education for all” ([UNESCO, 2015](#)) resound. Such outcomes lead to calls for even more widespread internationalization of teacher education (e.g., [Kissock & Richardson, 2010](#)).

An examination of the literature regarding international programs in teacher education indicate an overwhelming focus on outcomes for PSTs. For example, [Smolcic and Katunich \(2017\)](#) present 25 studies in their meta-analysis, all of which focused on the experiences of visitors, and 24 specifically concerned with PSTs. A further 23 studies identified from the past two decades also focused on PST outcomes (e.g., [Addleman et al., 2014](#); [Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006](#); [Cushnor & Mahon, 2002](#); [Fitzgerald, 2019](#); [Kissock & Richardson, 2010](#)). Occasionally, papers dealing with the perspectives from academic staff were evident (e.g., [Parr et al., 2017](#); [Parr, 2012](#); [Sharpe, 2015](#); [Soong, 2013](#)). Findings from these papers build the research base of success for PST learning about intercultural understanding/competence; increased confidence in their teaching skills; enhanced skills for teaching students who have English as a second or later acquired language, and sometimes, changed worldviews. Glaringly absent from the available literature, are studies reporting outcomes from the perspective of host country participants.

A further feature evident in the studies reviewed, was the tendency for programs to involve PST participants from more economically developed countries, and predominantly Western-European cultures (e.g., [Okken et al., 2019](#); [Smolcic & Katunich, 2017](#)). The most prevalent inter-cultural exchange were Western-Eastern inter-cultural experiences (e.g., [Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006](#); [Cruikshank & Westbrook, 2013](#); [Hamel et al., 2010](#); [Kim & Choi, 2020](#); [Santoro & Major, 2012](#)). A relatively small number of programs had Western-Western interactions, such as US to England ([Marx & Moss, 2011](#)); Sweden to France ([Hadley Dunn et al., 2014](#)); and US to European destinations (e.g., [Addleman et al., 2014](#); [Pence & Macgillivray, 2008](#)). As with the current study, almost half of the existing studies involved Western-European PST programs visiting previously colonised, low-income/Global South world contexts (e.g., [Edwards et al., 2016](#); [Fitzgerald, 2019](#); [Kaliban, 2013](#); [Klein & Wikan, 2019](#); [Mathews, 2017](#); [Rubin, 2020](#); [Santoro & Major, 2012](#)) where the potential for unequal power relations is high. Despite this, none of the existing studies give voice to the host country participants.

The nature of international teacher education programs in developing country contexts is raised by [Sharpe \(2015\)](#) who notes the relative scarcity of homestay-type programs and the increasing pressure program organisers face in providing “familiar amenities and conveniences...[including] access to internet, English TV, and swimming pools, as well as excursions to beaches...” (p. 230). Perhaps aligned with this pressure is the tendency to use international rather than local schools as the site for international teaching experiences ([Smolcic & Katunich, 2017](#)). These sorts of limitations clearly bound the type of immersion experience for PSTs, and potentially limit any fuller understanding and appreciation of the lives and culture of their host-country contemporaries.

Some studies, predominantly from the field of Development Studies, do report perspectives of host-country participants. These studies generally concern volunteering programs, but even then, are relatively scarce compared to the plethora of literature relating to outcomes from the perspective of the volunteers. Within the studies located, reports from host country perspectives are generally quite positive (e.g., [Ashwood-Smith et al., 2019](#); [Fraser, 2019](#); [Lough et al., 2018](#)) and highlight capacity-building outcomes for individual and organisational hosts involved (e.g., [Fraser, 2019](#)); including benefits of “transfer of skills, ... mutual learning, and cross-cultural understanding” ([Binns & McLachlan, 2018](#), p. 66–67). Overarching personal, professional, or co-operative development value has also been cited as reasons participants become and/or stay involved as hosts ([Tiessen, 2018](#)).

Warnings for visiting participants and their program organisers were also featured. These included managing issues around language barriers and the need for cross-cultural preparation before programs took place (e.g., [Fraser, 2019](#); [Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002](#); [Lough et al., 2018](#); [Tiessen, 2018](#)). Awareness of the time and focus away from normal activities that hosting demands ([Lough et al., 2018](#)) was also urged as a consideration to be factored into program designs. Underpinning structural and power inequalities between host and visiting country participants has also been flagged as an important factor that needs due diligence in planning and implementing international programs ([Tiessen, 2018](#)). This adds to the importance of this paper which concentrates on the voices of host country teachers' experiences – voices that appear to have, so far, been silent in the literature.

3. The current program

The program at the centre of this study involved Australian PSTs completing a four-week teaching practicum in the Solomon Islands. The program was designed to be mutually beneficial and was instigated by the principal of one of the Solomon Islands partner schools in 2008. This principal believed that Australian PSTs could assist in professional learning outcomes for his primary-level teaching staff, who contained a mixture of one-year certificate qualification or no qualifications at all – a situation common in the country (Edwards et al., 2016). Indeed, only about 1 % of teachers in Solomon Islands hold a Bachelor level qualification that is mandatory for Australian teachers.

Over the eight years between program inception and this data collection, the program evolved in line with our learning which stemmed from our personal experiences, feedback from PSTs, program evaluation, and discussion with our partners. Feedback from PSTs indicated a greater need for support in-country, so we increased the student and staff initiated debriefing opportunities. Feedback from in-country teacher partners saw the expansion of the program from upper primary (Grades 3–6) to all of primary (Grades 1–6), addition of sessions run by program leaders (staff development sessions and health sessions for grade six girls), expansion to include two additional schools, and the inauguration of interschool sports competition. Strengths of the program were recognised and maintained, including the authentic immersion in daily living (e.g., shopping at local markets, using local transport) and cultural events (e.g., preparing for and participating in feasting celebrations, learning cultural dance).

In the year of data collection, two schools were involved in the program: one on the outskirts of the capital city, Honiara (School A), and the other on a nearby, small island (School B). School A was relatively wealthy compared to other schools in the country. It was a K-12 school with approximately 1200 students and two classes running at each grade level in the primary division where the program was based. Twelve Australian PSTs taught across all grade levels (1–6) in the primary division, one for each class of children. PSTs placed at School A lived in shared accommodation in the main part of the city. Here, living conditions were commensurate with their teacher partners – running water, but no hot water and intermittent access to power. PSTs shopped at the local market, utilised local public transport, and cooked their own food using local produce.

School B was a small primary school in a rural location on a small island approximately one hour's boat ride from Honiara. Approximately 120 children attended Grades 1–6 at the school, and six PSTs (one for each grade level) worked at this location. There were no cars or roads on the island, no power, no running water, and the nearest phone reception was a 40-minute walk away. Here, PSTs lived in community, hosted by families, or in a schoolhouse on the school premises. Local community members were employed to provide meals for PSTs. Class sizes were relatively small (no more than 20 children) compared to the class sizes of School A which ranged from approximately 40–60.

At each location, PSTs planned with their local teacher partners with support from accompanying academic staff. PSTs joined in extra-curricular activities at both schools, and local teachers completed the university-based practicum reports to evaluate PSTs' teaching performance (an activity also supported by accompanying academic staff). One staff member lived on site with PSTs from School B, and two staff members lived in the shared accommodation in Honiara.

The program was co-planned with the principals and deputy principals from each school. This ensured that needs of all parties were being addressed as best as possible. Outcomes of the program were:

1. Develop knowledge and skills to work sensitively and appropriately in cross-cultural contexts.
2. Plan and facilitate effective teaching and learning across a range of discipline areas in EAL/D contexts.
3. Reflect on living and teaching experiences in relation to Global North and Global South contexts.
4. Critically analyse experiences of difference between developed and developing countries to enhance attitudes towards more equitable living and justice for all.
5. Recognise and articulate the importance of education for human development.

Some of these outcomes were specific to Australian PSTs (e.g., Outcomes 3 and 4) whilst others (Outcomes 1, 2, and 5) were applicable to both Australian PSTs and Solomon Islander teachers. These outcomes reflected the intentions of both Solomon Islands' school leaders and the academic staff involved.

4. Methods and methodology

4.1. Theoretical framework

In recognition of the likelihood for international immersion programs to involve previously colonised, Global South world countries, our study is guided by cultural theory and development literature, where we examine concepts of power, privilege, colonising behaviours, relationships, and communication.

4.1.1. Cultural theory

Although lacking a universal definition, and even argued by some to be redundant (Jahoda, 2012), culture is generally accepted as being “ubiquitous” (Neuliep, 2018, p. 15). Culture provides the rules and norms through which decisions are made on what is said and done, and how words and behaviours are interpreted by others. These explicit and implicit rules link to visible (words and behaviours) and invisible (values, beliefs, and assumptions) dimensions of culture (Minkov, 2013; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009; Storti, 2009) which influence actions, sometimes in ways the individual is not even aware (Minkov, 2013).

Culture maps (Bennett, 2009) identify cultural dimensions, which can assist understanding the rules and norms of interacting cultures. A plethora of dimensions have been identified through various frameworks (e.g., see Hofstede, 1980; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Schwartz, 1992; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Collectively, these frameworks cover notions of psychological, cognitive, emotional, social, and environmental values and beliefs that influence typical behaviours of different cultural groups. They need to be used with caution to ensure that the complex phenomenon of culture is not oversimplified (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) or over-generalised (Neuliep, 2018). Not all dimensions of culture can be given equal attention here, hence those most widely cited in the literature that also resonate with the experiences of the researchers in this study are discussed further below.

One of the most widely acknowledged dimensions of cultural difference is that of Individualism-Collectivism. Individualism values independence, individual achievement, and views each person as having unique needs and rights (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Alternatively, collectivism privileges harmony, solidarity, and the needs of the group over those of the individual (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Hall (1976) also argued that culture influences low (explicit) and high (implicit) communication, which influences the extent of direct communication, and monochronic versus polychronic time orientation – the extent to which time influences scheduling or is “dispensed with altogether” (Luan, 2012, p. 1209). Alongside these, the dimension of Power-Distance describes the extent and influence of hierarchical structures, or the extent to which decision making is democratic, consultative (low power) or not (high power) (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Another dimension, Uncertainty Avoidance, describes the tendency for a culture to rely on traditional practices or embrace new and untired directions.

Western-world cultures, such as Australia, tend to be almost exclusively individualistic and low-context in cultural dimensions. Contrasting this, “developing” nations, such as Solomon Islands, are generally collectivist (Hofstede, 2009; Wagler, 2009) and have high-context communication styles. Also, steeped in a history of “Big-man” societal structure (Dinnen & Allen, 2015), Solomon Islands tends to be very hierarchical compared to Australia.

4.1.2. Development theory - power

Alongside dimensions of culture, intercultural studies need to account for potential reproduction of privilege (Escobar, 1995; Ife, 2016; Pease, 2010). Power automatically aligns with privilege (Pease, 2010), particularly when previously imperial or colonised nations are involved (Ife, 2016). This power manifests in a normativity given to Western perspectives (Pease, 2010) on what is aspirational due to the “positions of power and assumed superiority” (p. 186) attributed to Western peoples (Ife, 2016). Thus, the Western, privileged background of Australian PSTs in this study “by virtue of their membership in dominant groups” (Bailey, 1998, p. 109) have an unavoidable, structural power in their relationship with Solomon Islander participants.

4.2. Participants and recruitment

Twenty-four Solomon Islands in-service teachers/school leaders across two schools were invited to participate in the study. Altogether, 21 staff responded to this invitation and participated in the study.

Participants were:

- a part of the school leadership; and/or
- a primary division classroom teacher directly involved with PSTs; or
- a secondary division teacher from School A, identified and invited by school leadership.

Fifteen participants were from School A and six were from School B. Five School Leaders (3 from School A and 2 from School B) participated, four of whom were also classroom teachers who worked directly with Australian PSTs. Twelve classroom teachers who worked with PSTs (8 from School A and 3 from School B) along with a further four teachers from the secondary division of School A participated. Participants’ experience of working with PSTs in the program ranged from 1 to 8 years.

Table 1 provides summary information about participants. The research project was explained at a staff meeting at each school, and an invitation letter and consent form were made available in each staff room. An opportunity to ask questions in this forum was provided and staff were also encouraged to approach us or their school principal individually if they had questions they did not want to ask in the public forum. Those willing to participate were asked to return their completed consent forms to a box in the staff room. This enabled the researchers to consult and organise groupings and times for the focus group interviews. The purposive sampling enabled targeting of individuals who worked directly with PSTs and hence were most likely to hold knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Purposive sampling, as adopted in this study, is an appropriate approach in qualitative studies (Creswell &

Table 1
Participant information .

Participant Information	School A	School B
Number of Males	5	3
Number of Females	10	3
Number of Primary Teachers	8	4
Number of Secondary Teachers	4	0
Number of School Leaders	3	2
Total Number of Participants	15	6

Creswell, 2018).

Elements of the research were co-planned with participants in the project, including the identification of potential participants as outlined above, and grouping of staff for particular focus group interviews. This was negotiated with the school leaders as well as individual teachers to ensure groupings were culturally appropriate (i.e., for appropriate gender and/or within group power dynamics).

4.3. Data collection and analysis

Focus group interviews were utilised, which allowed for “broad and general” questions that Creswell and Creswell (2023) indicate are needed to enable participants to “construct the meaning of a situation forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (p. 9). Focus group researchers are concerned with “understanding social and cultural phenomena from participants’ perspectives” (Kamberelelis et al., 2018, p. 692). To enable this, our interviews were informed by a critical incident interview protocol incorporating four open-ended questions to support the framing and conceptualisation of a critical incident. This approach helped to ensure participants were able to speak about what they felt was important, rather than focusing on outcomes pre-determined as important by the researchers.

The critical incident approach involves examining a situation, interpreting its significance, and making value judgements (Tripp, 2012). The term “critical incident” can include everyday events that stand out (Martin, 1996); significant episodes (Bruster & Peterson, 2013); bumpy moments (Romano, 2006); and broad, sustained issues (Kosnik, 2001). They are generally personal and made critical by the meaning-making attached to the experience – which may be shared or individual (Tripp, 2012). Appendix A shows the critical incident focus group protocol utilised and demonstrates the openness of the questioning. Teachers were able to identify anything they wanted to discuss – positive or negative. This meant data was unhindered by topic/thematic questions and led to raw data appropriate for inductive analysis. It also meant that both positive and negative outcomes could be identified to best answer the research question.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to enable the analytical induction (Burns, 2000) for identification of “common features and major dimensions of variation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 349). To create rigour in the analysis process, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis was adopted. This involved reading transcripts for familiarisation (Phase 1), utilising NVIVO software to generate initial codes (Phase 2), engaging in constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) through the search for and reviewing of themes (Phases 3 and 4), before defining and naming themes (Phase 5) in readiness for reporting (Phase 6). Author 1 conducted the primary analysis, with Authors 2 and 3 engaged in checking, discussing, and confirming themes to enhance trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) in analysis was further achieved through triangulation of data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which involved examining multiple focus group interviews. Member checks were also established through the focus group approach, which acts as a form of member checking because “participants may be able to trigger one another’s memories and therefore increase the accuracy of the necessary data” (Morse, 2018, p. 811). Katz-Buonincontro and Nezu (2022) also note that respondent validation can be ascertained during the focus group interview by interviewers paraphrasing responses and enabling participants to verify or amend the way their contributions are presented during the discussion. This can then replace the need for post-transcript member checks, which were not possible in this study due to limited means to provide participants with interview transcripts and maintain confidentiality once the researchers had returned to Australia. This is because participants lacked access to email and technology, and it was more appropriate to the oral language traditions and English capabilities of participants. Finally, we have reported results using verbatim quotes from participants to ensure their voice is directly accessible by the reader, which enables the reader to consider the interpretations reported based on participants’ own words.

4.4. Researcher positionality

The researchers have history of working in Solomon Islands and are aware of appropriate cultural mores for Melanesian peoples. At the time of data collection, the first and second authors were co-leaders of the program with seven- and four-years’ experience respectively. This meant the researchers collecting data had established relationships with the participants and were inherently involved in the program and the research, which is appropriate in qualitative research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The third author joined the program in 2017, and as such, brought a level of objectivity (along with extensive experience working in South-East and West Asia) to the data analysis and subsequent writing.

As the researchers are from a high-income country in the region that provides most of the Solomon Islands’ foreign aid, unequal power dimensions could influence the study. The length of time working in-country previously and strength of the relationships formed is likely, however, to have countered some of these potential issues (Escobar, 1995). Efforts to decolonise our practices, primarily achieved through the relationship building and co-planning of the experience and the research processes, are also likely to have assisted in reducing the influence of the unavoidable power-distance.

4.5. Ethical considerations

Cultural influences informed decisions regarding data collection. For example, the use of focus group interviews aligns best with the oral tradition and collectivist society of the Melanesian peoples of Solomon Islands (Burt, 1998; Denoon & Lacey, 2017). Gender influenced groupings of staff (females offered an opportunity to be in a separate group) in recognition of the patriarchal society and gender inequality existing in Solomon Islands (PIFS, 2015). Individuals were also placed in groups with those of a similar position in

the school (classroom teachers together; leadership group together) to ameliorate potential in-group power dimensions. Data is reported in aggregated form that does not identify the two host sites to protect individuals' identity.

The project received Human Ethics Research Committee Clearance (University Ethics Register Number: 2016–219E).

5. Results

Teachers identified a range of critical incidents that sparked discussion in terms of what we identified to be four overarching categories (1) Program Benefits; (2) Program Challenges; (3) Suggestions for Improvement; and (4) Teachers' perceptions of PSTs' experiences. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) process for identifying themes, these groupings were identified with our research question, concerned with investigating what the program benefits and challenges were, in mind. In total, 200 excerpts contributed to the identification of themes within these four categories. Themes and sub-themes are identified in Table 2 followed by an overview with excerpts provided to demonstrate their meaning. They are analysed further in the discussion through the lenses of cultural and development theory.

5.1. Category 1 - program benefits

Program Benefits constituted 70 % of all comments made across six focus groups. These benefits included Professional Learning; Children's Learning; the benefits of the Intercultural Exchange; and other general positive statements (Table 3). The sort of comments made about professional learning were similar across the two host locations.

5.1.1. Professional learning

Professional learning was the major theme consisting of 74 % of program benefits identified and included sub-themes of teaching strategies, preparation for teaching, professional commitment, relationship building with children, classroom management, and assessment strategies.

Table 2
Categories of data with themes and sub-themes .

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency% (Overall/Within theme)
Category 1: Program Benefits		
Professional Learning		104 (74 %)
	<i>Teaching Strategies</i>	44 (42 %)
	<i>Preparation for Teaching</i>	24 (23 %)
	<i>Professional Commitment</i>	12 (11 %)
	<i>Relationships with Children</i>	7 (7 %)
	<i>Classroom Management</i>	7 (7 %)
	<i>Assessment Strategies</i>	5 (5 %)
	<i>General Comments re Professional Learning</i>	5 (5 %)
Children's Learning		22 (16 %)
	English/Academic Learning	16 (73 %)
	Learning Behaviours	6 (27 %)
Inter-cultural Exchange		10 (7 %)
	<i>Benefits of the Exchange</i>	6 (60 %)
	<i>Relationships</i>	4 (40 %)
General Positive Comments		4 (3 %)
Category 2: Program Challenges		
School & Classroom		12 (50 %)
	<i>Teaching and Planning Barriers</i>	6 (50 %)
	<i>Class Sizes</i>	3 (25 %)
	<i>Discipline Approaches</i>	3 (25 %)
Resource Issues		7 (29 %)
Culture & Language		5 (21 %)
Category 3: Suggestions for Improvement		
Expand Involvement		9 (47 %)
Program Duration & Timing		4 (21 %)
Academic Expertise		2 (11 %)
Other		4 (21 %)
Category 4: Perceptions of PSTs' Needs & Experiences		
Perceived Needs		4 (45 %)
Increased Confidence		2 (22 %)
Challenges Adjusting		3 (33 %)
Not coded (poor quality sound)		8 (4 %)
Total		200 (100 %)

Table 3
Program benefits.

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency% (Overall/Within theme)
Professional Learning		104 (74 %)
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	<i>Learning Behaviours</i>	6 (27 %)
Inter-cultural Exchange		10 (7 %)
	<i>Benefits of the Exchange</i>	6 (60 %)
	<i>Relationships</i>	4 (40 %)
General Positive Comments		4 (3 %)
Total		140 (100 %)

Teaching Strategies. Learning about different teaching strategies was identified in almost half (44 %) of the contributions associated with the professional learning theme. Teachers discussed PST use of student-centred learning, describing it as “explorative” (T1), “engage[s] all the kids” (T2), and where “children found answers for themselves (T3)” They saw these features as benefiting children’s learning by “increase[ing] their thinking ability” (T1) and making learning “into a game ... So, it’s more like fun” (T1). They compared these approaches to their more traditional classroom practices, teaching from the textbook. One teacher noted a drawback of this approach stating: “if I follow what is in the book, it’s like closing them, their thinking box ... and [they]get bored quickly” (T1).

They also spoke about the differentiated learning experiences PSTs modelled: “*it suits the needs of every learner in the classroom*” (T3) and another stated how children “*work on their own speed and they create their own things ... he or she is doing it in her own level, doing the same thing*” (T5).

This range of representative comments indicates how host teachers viewed PSTs’ teaching strategies as a key program benefit for their own professional learning.

Preparation for teaching. Host teachers were impressed by PSTs’ preparation for teaching. They spoke about their own practice of “always follow the teacher’s guide” (T14) and how this does not involve any preparation - “we just look and teach, not prepare” (T14). They observed how PSTs referred to the curriculum document, but then planned student-centred strategies to deliver the material “in the book it says the way is there, but the way the [PST] teacher prepares this is different ... they always prepare in advance for these teacher/children interaction part of the lesson” (T8).

Several teachers commented on PSTs’ resourcefulness noting that “*there are no resources, but ... they were very resourceful*” (T7). This is because PSTs looked to the local setting for items that would be easily accessible: “*the things, cups that we use*”, “*the disposal materials that we think is not useful*” (T1), “*the things that are around in the environment*” (T5).

Another described a maths lesson where “*instead of using the manufactured materials, we collect everything from outside which we make use of the natural environment*” (T9). This use of generally available items was “*a surprise*” for teachers and they commented that “*a lot of these things are around us*” (T1).

The benefit of resourcing lessons with hands on materials was described as important for engaging children: “*then they’re busy with their work*” (T6) and “*it suits the needs of every learner*” (T3). Some noted a positive change in children’s behaviour “*children that used to be playing, they stop doing that and they involve in the activities*” (T9). Overarchingly, teachers commented on learning from these observations, gaining “*ideas that I should do,*” (T1) “*confidence,*” (T13) and “*creativity and innovation ... we have to be creative to make our own*” (T2).

Relationships with Children. Teachers discussed the way PSTs interacted with children during lessons, “they don’t just sit on the table and then watch, they walk around” (T1), “they get down to their level” (T13) and “assist them to do the work” (T2). Teachers identified how this interaction developed teacher-child relationships. One commented, “when I did it, I feel close to the kids... on the same level where we can talk ... So, I think that really helped them to see that I care for them, and I respect them” (T2). This reasoning is quite different from the underpinning reasons that this sort of practice occurs in Australian culture, something we explore in the discussion.

Assessment Strategies. Teachers commented on initial assessment strategies used by PSTs, indicating that she learned “to engage students in pre-testing” (T3). For example, one related how the PST “asked them first what they know about the solar system, and what they want to know more” (T1) and then based planning on children’s responses. Teachers acknowledged the effectiveness of this and other examples of initial assessment:

I think it’s very important ... sometimes we teach what the kids already know, and they get bored, yeah, and it’s not really what they need to know, ... and I just realised that this is *why some of the kids don’t want to be involved in the activities.* (T1)

Professional Commitment. Host teachers reflected on behaviours they admired in PSTs: “by looking at all those activities it helps us teachers even with ourselves, who we are in our profession” (T2) stated one participant. This linked to punctuality and presence in

the classroom:

... we go to the office, we come to the tearoom, and the kids stay by themselves. Now this is what I learn, it's from [PST] teachers, when lesson start, they stay in the class until the time's up. And as well, break times, they don't wait for the bell to ring, they show the time ... that it's 5 min to, they went to their classroom, that really inspires me. (T1)

5.1.2. Children's learning

Teachers identified benefits for children's learning mainly associated with English language and speaking. They noted children's "confidence" overcoming being "shy to talk" (T8), having "courage" (T16), and greater willingness to practice. One teacher indicated that the school's students were performing better in "public speaking competition in town" which he attributed to what "they learn from the exposure they have with the [PSTs]" (T16). Although PSTs worked with children in the primary division, it was the teachers from the secondary division who spoke most about these improvements: "if I compare our students coming from the primary here with those who have come from other schools, I could say generally that they are good in written English" (T18).

Teachers also remarked that children were "more active students compared to the past" (T19) and that they are "very confident compared to the ones coming from other schools" (T19).

We can see clearly the children, how they want to express themselves without fear. They talk openly, even to us, to the teachers; they show us if they disagree, they tell us. (T1)

In asking if this was culturally appropriate, teachers answered:

Of course, yes, because I think that is one weakness in our children, that they fear to speak in front of elders and in front of teachers and even among themselves when a superior is present with them. So, it's a good thing to see them speak. (T17)

Although one conversation indicated it was not always positive:

Q: Do you think the impact of being more confident at that younger age is impacting on behaviour?

T1: Yes.

Q: In a good or a bad way?

T1: I would say more is good. Because like sometimes they want to – they want the teachers to... what would I say...?

T18: Gain attention?

T1: Yeah, gain the attention and in that way sometimes they don't show respect or something. They want to be heard more, and they want what they want.

T18: They forget their manners.

T19: They become active. Sometimes we have to control them too. But that should be okay because that should be a challenge and we need to look at how we can utilize that kind of behaviour in a positive way.

(Focus Group 6)

We consider the potential colonising impact of this example in the discussion.

5.1.3. Inter-cultural exchange

Teachers noted the benefit of expanding children's knowledge beyond "Solomon Islands and the region like Papua New Guinea" (T7) and the "cultural link and integration [of our] different cultural backgrounds ... really promotes part of our bonding" (T16).

Within this theme, teachers also spoke of relationships between us as important in "breaking the barrier between me, as native, and the European" (T1). One teacher reported a change in her sense of feeling inferior to white people:

I've got this mentality in me that black people are ... they need to learn something and, and our...I felt that white people they are automatic, they can do everything. But I learn, I learn that, no, that's not true - all of us are learning. (T5)

Finally, the importance of relationships emerged in response to a query about changing the academic leaders in the program to

Table 4
Program challenges.

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency% (Overall/Within theme)
School & Classroom	Teaching and Planning Barriers	12 (50 %)
	Class Sizes	6 (50 %)
	Discipline Approaches	3 (25 %)
		3 (25 %)
Resource Issues		7 (29 %)
Culture & Language		5 (21 %)
Total		24 (100 %)

better meet areas of expertise, particularly English teaching that seemed to be valued. However, participants noted the importance of “*someone we already know*” because they might not be comfortable or “*open to speak again unless we personally know each other*” (T17). They noted the “*advantage for you and for us too because of your returning every year. You learn about our culture and you understand us better.*” (T18).

5.2. Category 2 - program challenges

Certain challenges associated with the school and classroom emerged in teachers’ discussions. Resource issues, and challenges associated with cultural and language differences were identified (see Table 4). Challenges tended to be similar across the two host locations, except when referring to class sizes, as there was a notable difference in the average class size between the two sites.

5.2.1. School and classroom challenges

Despite positive responses to the student-centred approaches of PSTs, teachers noted how challenging it was for them to adopt similar practices. Class sizes were particularly viewed as a barrier to effective teaching:

I would be very happy if I’ve got only 35 children in my class, I know that I will give all the best that I have for my children, but when there is 45 and 60, some of the weaker ones are left out. I don’t have enough time to help them, it’s, it’s very hard, challenging. (T5)

5.2.2. Resource issues

Although teachers reported positively on PSTs’ planning and resourcing of lessons, they also identified issues with their own capacity to replicate this. They noted there was a lack of “*space for us to sit down together*” (T13) for planning, and a lack of resources for learning and teaching. There was discussion around the use of the school’s budget which is hampered by a need for photocopying because of the limited number of “*textbooks com[ing] from Ministry of Education*” (T19). They also identified issues in accessing resources to support reading and to support planning and research activities for students.

5.2.3. Cultural and language challenges

Other cultural challenges involved the partnering of female PSTs with male host teachers. “*According to my culture ... Getting close to a female is quite - it’s a taboo for us ... I try my very best to forget about the taboo so that we can get much closer so that we can plan together and do things together*” (T13). This challenge was accommodated, but clearly with some discomfort. Despite the discomfort, it was embraced with the explanation that “*we need some cultural ideas from each other, so it doesn’t matter*” (T13), which other participants agreed with.

5.3. Category 3 - suggestions for improvement

Suggestions for improvement was a small category of 19 excerpts which were collated according to four themes (Table 5).

Almost half of the host teachers’ responses associated with program improvements were requests to expand the program, particularly to “*have [university] teachers in the secondary*” (T18). Some mentioned “*extend[ing] this program to other schools*” (T19) and into the “*early childhood division*” (T18). There were also requests to extend the duration of the program “*maybe your stay here ... is not long enough*” (T19) and some who suggested “*different parts of the year*” (T16) that do not intersect with the national examination period.

Other suggestions for improvement included needing PSTs (and possibly academic staff) to speak slowly and suggestions for bringing staff or PSTs with expertise in “*behaviour problems or attitude problems or reading and writing problems*” (T18).

Overall, this category constituted around 10 % of the total contributions, despite it being a direct question. This may link to a reluctance to be openly critical of the program, or it may reflect the overarching benefit the program was perceived to have.

5.4. Category 4 - perceptions of PSTs’ needs and experiences

Teachers discussed what they saw as the needs of PSTs, a category that included three sub-themes from eight excerpts (Table 6).

In discussing what they thought PSTs needed, teachers noted “*they are facing students with different backgrounds, different culture, different languages, so it’s really challenging for them*” (T2). They shared their observations of PSTs being too “*nervous just to*

Table 5
Suggestions for improvement.

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency%
Expand Involvement		9 (47 %)
Program Duration & Timing		4 (21 %)
Academic Expertise		2 (11 %)
Other		4 (21 %)
Total		19 (100 %)

Table 6
Perceptions of PSTs' Needs and Experiences.

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency%
Perceived Needs		4 (45 %)
Increased Confidence		2 (22 %)
Challenges Adjusting		3 (33 %)
Total		8 (100 %)

say something" (T5) when meeting their class for the first time. To address this, host teachers decided to give PSTs space to get to know the children and build their confidence:

...some of our teacher we also discuss, "Hey it's not a good idea to be there while they're in their first 2 days, let them by them self with the children, so that they get used of the children and they feel ... confidence in themselves." (T5)

Host teachers noted surprise at how quickly PSTs adapted to the different context:

"they're confident quickly that's the thing that really astonished me ...when they come to teach on this next day, it's different; a lot of improvement" (T1).

6. Discussion

Our theoretical framework of cultural and development theory informs our discussion of these results. As such, the discussion is organised in three sections: education as development practice; inter-cultural communication; and colonial and power relations. This framing enables us to identify benefits and challenges of our program, and thus answer the research question, whilst also actively examining potential inter-cultural and colonial/power influences that might limit the findings reported.

6.1. Education as development practice

Education has long been identified as crucial to development and its importance is recognised for achieving all 17 of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as being a goal itself (United Nations, 2015a). Education is a major concern in Solomon Islands with relatively low levels of school completion and teacher education (MEHRD, 2016). Classrooms tend to be crowded and ill-equipped (Sharma et al., 2015). These conditions make education a priority in the country. As such, programs targeting education often bring a range of benefits, and this seems to be the case given the data reported by Solomon Islands teachers in this study.

Host teachers reported more benefits, particularly regarding their professional learning, than any other form of feedback. Professional learning was identified in relation to teaching strategies, preparation, and resourcing. The minimum teaching qualification in Solomon Islands is a one-year certificate (MEHRD, 2011), and this applied to all classroom teacher participants in our study. By comparison, Australia's minimum teaching qualification is a four-year bachelor's degree, of which our PSTs had completed three years when they participated in the program. Moreover, the Solomon Islands certificate has focused on content rather than pedagogical knowledge (Jones & Cinelli, 2018) (although this has recently changed), hence teachers had minimal theoretical knowledge of pedagogical practices associated with effective learning. As such, the nature and duration of teacher education in Solomon Islands is likely to have influenced the overly positive focus on PSTs' teaching in the focus group discussions.

Indicative of potential colonising influences (which is discussed further below), host teachers also reported how children expected more from them after experiencing PSTs' teaching, and noted that if they did not provide engaging, student-centred activities, children would "become bored" and "do sort of nasty things in the classroom like hitting each other" (T1). They reported that this was a particular issue for new teachers to the school. These findings align with Hattie's (2009) premise that key indicators of teacher quality lie in the extent of student engagement in learning and in students' perceptions of their teachers. Aligned with the student-centred approach, Hattie (2009) also states that teachers need to enable "students to do more than what teachers do unto them" (p. 238), a sentiment captured almost verbatim by one of the host teachers who reflected that they needed to "let the kids do more work than us" (T1). So even though Hattie's (2009) analysis focused primarily on education systems from Western, developed economies, the findings appear to have resonance in Solomon Islands.

Host teachers cited increased awareness of the importance of lesson preparation, including relevant resourcing to support a student-centred approach. This also featured in the Program Challenges theme, where financing was raised as a concern linked to material resourcing of lessons. Physical resources can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Glewwe et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009; Naylor & Sayed, 2014). However, Ganimian and Murnane (2016) warn that provision of physical resources alone does not necessarily correlate with student outcomes in developing country contexts if teachers do not know how to use them effectively. Here, the program under study has merit in modelling use of resources. Phillips and Owens (1994) speak to this need specifically in Solomon Islands, calling for "Practice delivery in the real situation" as a core principle for enacting education programs due to the potential advantage gained when teachers "learn what and how to teach within their own cultural context" (p. 82).

Another key facet of quality teaching was that of professional commitment. Teacher absence is an issue in developing country contexts and is reported to have a clear and negative effect on student learning outcomes (Ganimian & Murnane, 2016; Glewwe et al., 2016; Naylor & Sayed, 2014). Absenteeism was an acknowledged issue by host teachers. They noticed the work of PSTs in not just

attending each day, but their punctuality and presence in class for the duration (and beyond) the official school day. This relates to Hattie's (2009) call for "passionate teachers" something that one host teacher observed in PSTs which he described as "interest" in teaching: "your students here don't want to give us the chance to teach, they want to teach all day ... it shows that the [PSTs] are very interested in this profession" (T13). This comment, and many others reflecting professional commitment, also related to teacher presence, punctuality, and the issue of absenteeism in Solomon Islands – all key components of professional commitment recognised by Naylor and Sayed (2014), but perhaps, also indicative of the cultural perceptions of time, which we discuss in the next section.

There was a strong focus on increased English learning for children in host teachers' discussion of program benefits. English is a third or later acquired language in Solomon Islands, and the official language of instruction (Spratt, 2016). This, along with the diverse range of vernacular languages (up to 80), leaves English language teaching and learning fraught with difficulties for teachers. It is thus not surprising that teachers valued the English language learning that PSTs supported. Increases in English language learning are important in the context of 2015 figures reporting that only 15 % of Year 4 Solomon Islands' children were performing at or above the expected standard (DFAT, 2017). Programs addressing literacy learning are also cited to be of significance more generally in the development literature (e.g., Kingsbury, 2016). The concern with this, however, is the potential contribution to the continuing loss of vernacular languages that is occurring in Solomon Islands (Jourdan, 2008) and how this links to notions of the colonisation of language.

Overall, the findings are important in revealing the strength of the program in providing benefits for teachers' professional learning and children's English learning. These findings are supported by literature highlighting the link between quality teaching and the drive for increased teacher professional learning in development contexts (Naylor & Sayed, 2014). This is particularly the case in Solomon Islands where only 70 % of primary teachers were certified in 2015, making professional learning a key focus in Australia's development funding agenda for the country (DFAT, 2017).

6.2. Inter-cultural dimensions of the results

There is an ethical and professional requirement for Western visitors like those in this study, to be careful of the cultural and sociological perspectives that they bring, and that already exist in the schools and classrooms in which teaching takes place (Hattie, 2009; Phillips & Owens, 1994). When analysing the data for this study, there were multiple instances related to intercultural dimensions.

Since its inception, part of the intended features of this program was to have PSTs work collaboratively *with* host teachers. The rationale for this was tied to evidence regarding sustained learning outcomes from collaborative professional work (Teague & Anfar, 2012), and the need to support PSTs in meeting the language and cultural needs of children. Despite revisiting the importance of classroom presence at the commencement of each year, teachers have consistently left the classroom for all or most of the teaching day. As program leaders, we have often speculated on the reasons for this, and have thought it was perhaps due to a lack of confidence among host teachers. However, results in this study reveal that host teachers discussed and decided to leave so PSTs could gain *their* confidence without feeling watched over – exposing how our biases colour our interpretation of events through our own cultural lens (Neuliep, 2018). As well as providing a revelation on why this keeps happening, this data has highlighted two key dimensions of inter-cultural communication.

Firstly, in Australia there is a legal obligation for qualified, registered teachers to be in the room with PSTs. This also fulfils a mentoring purpose, especially in the early stages, to assess and scaffold the level of support PSTs need. This relates to the low-context culture of Australia, where communication is open and explicit (Hall, 1976). Any sense of inferiority, embarrassment, or low confidence of a PST is almost inconsequential. Lack of confidence is expected, accepted, and to be dealt with.

In contrast, our teacher participants placed the feelings of the PSTs above other potential needs and giving them time and space to overcome their initial nerves without being observed was more important than any other practical support that teachers felt they could offer. Moreover, despite repeated discussions regarding host teachers being present, none of the host teachers said anything about the agreement they had made between themselves to contravene this objective. This is a classic example of the non-verbal communication patterns typical of high-context cultures where "implicit meaning and indirect messages" (Gudykunst et al., 1996, p. 511) are given.

Face work, or Conflict Face Negotiation Theory, represents another intercultural dimension impacting the classroom presence issue, and is related to individual-collective and power-distance cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980). Facework refers to the patterns of behaviour with which individuals engage, to project a desired outward image (Ting-Toomey, 2009). When situations arise that threaten this "face," behaviours to "save face" are adopted. One of the most common of these behaviours, is avoidance (Ting-Toomey, 2009), which often goes together with being obliging (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Avoidance/obliging is a preventative facework strategy that assists in minimising or preventing any loss of image, which Gudykunst et al. (1996) associate with Uncertainty Avoidance. It applies to our situation firstly by obliging through the seeming agreement to be in the classroom, and then avoidance of discussing why this did not take place year after year of our emphasising its importance. Our respective individual and collectivist cultures played a part in this face-saving strategy, as did the power distance undoubtedly created between white, western academics, and Melanesian, post-colonial Solomon Islander teachers. Ting-Toomey (2009) indicates that these two cultural dimensions (individualism-collectivism and power distance) have a particular tendency to create the perceived need for facework.

Another key inter-cultural dimension that emerged in the data related to the theme of *Building Relationships with Children*. This theme was identified in teachers' discussions regarding how PSTs moved about the classroom to support children's learning. In Australia this movement is explicitly taught as a key strategy that enables formative assessment of children's understanding and progress in classroom work (McInerney & McInerney, 2010). It is also an effective classroom management strategy, where presence in the immediate vicinity helps to (extrinsically) motivate children to stay on task (Everston & Emmer, 2013; Rogers, 2015). However,

when host teachers discussed this strategy, they all noted how important it was for building relationships with students, showing the children that they “*care[d] for them*” and “*respect[ed] them*” (T2) rather than linking it to any explicit teaching, assessment, or management strategy. It shows the insight host teachers had in how relationships are the underlying factor that gives rise to the learning and management of students and highlights the importance of relationships in the collectivist Solomon Islands culture.

Another example of the importance of relationships emerged when host teachers responded to queries about the expertise of academic staff accompanying the program. Despite previous conversation centred around literacy learning needs, staff were quick to indicate that having the established relationship was more important. This possibly links to issues reported by Phillips and Owens (1994) regarding a history of mistrust and suspicion that exists as a legacy of the “tens of thousands of expatriate foreigners” (p. 86) who have come and gone with varying success in implementing programs in the name of development.

In Australian culture, it is important to protect program longevity and sustainability by regularly inducting new and replacing previous staff into programs as a part of succession planning. This reflects Australia’s low context, individualistic culture, where the relationship is more likely to be viewed as being with the institution rather than with representative individuals. This highlights a fundamental difference in the individualist and collectivist values that are placed on relationships in our respective cultures.

Other, perhaps more obvious cultural dimensions were also evident. In particular, the differences in monochronic and polychronic attitudes to time revealed through the keeping and managing of time, including aspects like punctuality. Changes in children’s attitudes and confidence in speaking with adults were also noted, which is an example of Hofstede (2009) power-distance dimension of culture and reflects the hierarchical nature of relationships in Solomon Islands. This also links to potential colonial influences that are discussed next.

6.3. Potential colonial and/or power dimensions

Despite the overarching positivity expressed, there were some findings that need careful reflection for potential, unintended colonising influences, or unfair dimensions of power. McKay (2016) acknowledges the centrality of power in development, that often sees previously colonised peoples valuing and adopting cultural ideologies of colonisers above their own (Ife, 2016). One example that raised such concern, involved references teachers made to changes in children’s learning behaviours. Teachers spoke of children being “*more active*” (T19) and “*confident*” (T16), ready to “*speak in front of elders*” (T17). These practices are encouraged in Western education systems. However, it is not generally an accepted cultural practice in Solomon Islands. Hence, these pronounced changes in children’s behaviour could be viewed as a negative influence in the program.

Further evidence supporting such a concern came from one teacher’s observation that children sometimes “*forget their manners*” (T18) in their efforts to “*be heard more*” (T1). While there was no direct evidence of exactly how this was enacted, it was certainly perceived, at least sometimes, that “*they don’t show respect*” (T1). When queried about the potential inappropriateness of this outcome, teachers unanimously agreed that it should be viewed as a positive, and adaptations should be made to “*utilize that kind of behaviour in a positive way*” (T19). Our concern is that this response may be at least partly motivated by the unintentional power we hold because of belonging to the dominant Western culture.

These concerns relate to the whole teaching program, where host teachers have appeared to consider PSTs’ approaches to preparation, resourcing, punctuality, attendance, and curriculum delivery as superior to their own. Despite efforts to guard against colonising practices as encouraged by Ife (2016), we are left with concern about the potential influence of our Western teaching program on our host country counterparts. This was telling in the theme regarding program challenges, where teachers’ experiences of a crowded school day and after school life responsibilities makes the sort of preparation PSTs modelled extremely challenging. Australian society is rife with modern conveniences that reduce the time and effort required for things like transport between work and home, shopping, food preparation, washing clothes, and general living. Solomon Islanders do not have access to these sorts of lifestyle privileges, and much of their out of school time is spent on meeting these needs for themselves and their families. This structural inequality impedes their capacity to engage in significant lesson preparation, and possibly imposes an unfair and unrealistic expectation on them.

Other challenges of the inter-cultural exchange also have implications for cultural homogenisation that may come from our practices being viewed as superior. These were evident in the money spent on resourcing lessons and in the expectation that males and females can work closely together. Host teachers consistently identified a lack of issue with these elements of difference, citing the overarching benefit of the inter-cultural exchange and of learning about one another’s cultures. It was captured by one host teacher who stated, “*we need some cultural ideas from each other, so it doesn’t matter*” (T13). While this speaks to the generosity of spirit that our hosts brought to the partnership, it nonetheless leaves a concern given the natural, even if unintended, power that we have in the relationships as members of a dominant cultural group. Ife (2016) does assert, though, that both cultures are likely to be changed from any meaningful interaction, so perhaps our colleague is correct in his assessment that “*it doesn’t matter*” (T13).

Despite these concerns, some evidence of ameliorating influences on potential colonising outcomes also came through in the data. Strong relationships are widely recognised as being essential in building trust, enabling openness, and increasing the potential for shared, mutually beneficial partnerships to be established (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017), and are particularly important in Solomon Islands culture (Phillips & Owens, 1994; Spratt, 2016). It was clear in teachers’ contributions, that they valued the relationships we have established through many years of working together. Longevity in partnership work is critical in effective development programs (Ife, 2016) and helps to overcome power discourses that might otherwise exist (Escobar, 1995; Schech et al., 2015). Established relationships recognised by partner members as being authentic also promote solidarity (Dutta, 2011; Ife, 2016; Rideout, 2011), which opens the possibility for profound, joint learning (Schech et al., 2015). The long history of building such open, trusting, inclusive partnerships with our Solomon Islands colleagues are recognised in the words of the host teachers calling for our

continued personal involvement.

7. Conclusions

The research explored the question:

What benefits and challenges do Solomon Islands host teachers identify from an Australian international professional experience placement occurring in their school/classroom?

Findings demonstrate an overarching sense of positive program benefits associated with Professional Learning Opportunities, Children's Learning, and Intercultural Exchange. The types of professional learning that appeared to be most important to host teachers was the insight gained into student-centred approaches to learning and teaching, and how these could be created with sufficient preparation, resourcing, and creativity from provided curriculum documents. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported the benefits of student-centred approaches for children's engagement and the fostering of thinking skills. These are all strong representations of quality education reported in the literature, placed at the centre of education development (Ganimian & Murnane, 2016; Glewwe et al., 2013; Naylor & Sayed, 2014), and align with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education's strategic plan (MEHRD, 2016).

Advancing children's learning confidence and competence, particularly in relation to English language, was also an important outcome of the program. This was recognised by teachers from the primary and secondary divisions of host schools, speaking to the value of the long-term nature of the program. As Ife (2016) states, effective development takes time, and this is one of the benefits of this program's separation from the development field where short-term funding can limit program duration. Findings linked to enhanced English skills support development outcomes, which broadly regard increases in literacy as important (e.g., DFAT, 2019; Kingsbury, 2016; United Nations, 2015b).

Findings also reveal challenges for host teachers, in relation to finding time and resources to invest in the types of preparation and subsequent teaching they witnessed. This, alongside other potential power and/or colonial influences associated with the program give rise to concerns of possible negative impacts on the Solomon Islands culture.

There was, however, evidence of strong, trusting relationships in the partnership created through the program's history over the previous seven years. The risk of colonising behaviour, even unintentional, is thought to be ameliorated when authentic and meaningful relationships exist (Fletcher, 2012; Ife, 2016). Moreover, programs based on authentic partnership tend to promote empowerment and ownership (Mosse, 2011), and solidarity and reciprocity (Dutta, 2011; Ife, 2016; Rideout, 2011; Schech et al., 2015). The eight-year partnership between the researchers and participants in this research helps in achieving the relationship encouraged here, although we remain aware of potential, unintentional power relations.

Supporting the overarching positive benefits that Solomon Islander teachers reported were their suggestions for improving the program. These predominantly focused on requests for program expansion in duration and reach. This reinforces the overall perception of value and benefit to school communities.

In considering these findings in relation to answering our research question, we are cognisant of making claims from the data that may be influenced by power imbalances and our colonial lens. We want to privilege the voice of our partner participants, so on one hand we need to respect and take at face value the contributions they made. It would, however, be irresponsible not to consider the potential impact of the power imbalance and colonial influences of which the development literature warns when white people from a dominant culture work in neocolonial settings. Our discussion above, hence, takes a critical lens to the findings in an effort to ameliorate any classification of findings as beneficial or challenging that may be naïve or inaccurate.

As our discussion highlights, there was evidence that some colonising potential exists, and this applied to the potential contribution to colonisation of language and of determining expectations on teachers around planning, teaching, and school attendance. As noted, these were elements of Australian PSTs' practice that drew teachers' negative reflections on their own professional behaviours. We believe that living circumstances contribute to Solomon Islands' teachers' capacity to perform some of these behaviours at the level PSTs modelled due to the onerous domestic duties that particularly fall on women, who are the dominant gender employed as primary school teachers both in Solomon Islands and Australia. Hence, whilst the teachers and school leaders themselves identified a range of positives and negatives to answer our research question, we view these responses with some caution so as to allow for the potential power relations and colonising impact of the program – which could be considered challenges that we are still working on reducing, and if possible, eradicating from our practice as program leaders.

7.1. Implications, limitations and future directions

Limitations of the study link to the potential colonising effects and power relations discussed above that exist in the program, and the influence this might have had on what teachers reported in their focus group interviews. This limitation has broader implications for the future running of the program, which could be addressed in several ways. Firstly, it is hoped that current reflection on potential bias and efforts to recognise and mitigate any sense of power, coercion, and colonisation is evident in our practice. This reflection and awareness needs to continue and to be strengthened with increased knowledge of how this power might play out in practice. Understanding how practice is and can be "ethnocentric and arrogant" (Escobar, 1995, p. 4) is an important step in further minimising power dimensions. Committing to a long-term partnership that continues to strengthen relationships is a strategy that, over time, will hopefully build even more openness, understanding, and equality in the program. It also highlights the need for long term programs and continuity in staffing to ensure relationships of trust can be established, which takes time and support from university leadership.

The study's findings have relevance for the field of teacher education, and perhaps higher education more broadly. Our program

shows that with careful design and implementation, investment in long-term relationships, and awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, international immersion programs can have positive learning benefits for host countries. This evidence is lacking in the literature. As noted in our introduction, international study programs are a popular strategy towards internationalisation in higher education in Global North countries, and the likelihood of these programs involving previously colonised, developing countries with unequal power relations and risks of colonising behaviours is high. As such, the moral, ethical, and sustainable development outcomes all need to be considered in the work of higher education institutions when planning international study programs. This study shows some ways in which such consideration can be given.

Further research into host country perspectives from the viewpoint of parents, children, and members of the wider community would also be beneficial, as would tracking Solomon Islands students longitudinally, to see whether there is any evidence of long-term benefits in post-school life arising from this program.

This study contributes to a very limited field of representation of the voices of developing country host participants. It captures their words as much as possible, and hopefully, honours the richness of their culture as one of collective, relationships-focussed community.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mellita Jones: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Renata Leah Cinelli:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Mary Gallagher:** Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Protocol

(1) Welcome,

Hello everyone and welcome to our session. Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about the prac program in Solomons. What we are hoping to achieve in this discussion is an idea of what you like, what you don't like, and how the program might be improved. You were invited because you have been involved in the program – either through classroom supervision, or by seeing the effects on other staff/children.

It is important that you know that there are no wrong answers. We are expecting that there will be different points of view. The more you can tell us about your feelings/experience, hopefully, the better we can make the program for everyone. So please feel free to share your opinions openly and honestly and keep in mind that we're just as interested in what's wrong/could be improved as we are about what's good about the program. This could be about the university students and/or about the leadership – by university staff and/or by Solomon's staff. We are tape recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments and we can't write fast enough to get them all down. No one else but us will have access to the tape recordings.

(2) Ground rules

1. We want you to do the talking.

We will try not to talk too much, expect perhaps to ask new questions or to ask for more detail about something that is said. We would like everyone to participate. We may call on you if we haven't heard from you in a while.

2. There are no right or wrong answers.

Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. What is said in this room stays here.

We want everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up, so we ask that you please do not discuss particular things that individual people say in this session.

4. We will maintain confidentiality.

We won't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous and we will not discuss any particular things that individual people say in this session.

Let's begin by going around and telling us your name and what experience you have of the program.

Open Interview Question

Spend 5–10 min writing about a critical moment or incident that happened during the program so far. (Critical incident is not necessarily a crisis but an incident that has stayed with you in your mind that you have been reflecting on or 'mulling over' for hours or days).

1. Each person read their critical moment aloud. We will discuss each one in turn. Some things to think about include:
 - a. What made the experience such a critical moment?
 - b. What factors contributed to the occurrence of the incident?
 - c. If a positive experience, what could be done to enhance this type experience? If a negative, what could be done to improve the situation next time?
 - d. What are the implications for you into the future?

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