‘Yumi Yumi’- a pre-service teacher global immersion in Vanuatu
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Abstract

Gaining understanding and appreciating variances within culture and education is an important goal for teacher education. Therefore, opportunities to become immersed in local communities and school systems within globalized contexts needs to be embedded within education programs. As advocated by Darling-Hammond (2011), having the experience to plan, teach and reflect on practice, whilst in practice, provides pre-service teachers with a stronger understanding of the interconnectedness between curriculum, pedagogy and culture. Coupled with this, the availability of mentoring from academics, with continuous support from peers established as a community of learners, has the potential for significant and deep learning for all participants.

Therefore, it is recommended that global immersions such as the Vanuatu experience reported upon in this paper, are encouraged and regarded as ‘Yumi Yumi’ – ‘You and Me’ - where we belong together in the quest for effective learning and teaching.

Keywords: learning communities, international engagement, pre-service teacher education

Introduction

Schooling in the past century has been labelled ‘Schooling in the Industrial Age’ where a key focus was on educating for knowledge acquisition and discipline (Brady & Kennedy, 2010). A main outcome of education during this period was to develop a literate and skilled population to provide a pool of workers for economic and social contexts in developed countries. In contrast, the challenge for today’s teachers is to assist pupils to become risk takers and flexible problem solvers within a global context embracing a variety of people and cultures (Lee & Caldwell, 2011). Thus emerging graduate teachers in
Australia require skills, knowledge and attitudes that allows them to respond to globalization within an international context (Altbarh & Knight, 2007), with the capacity to transfer and use knowledge and skills within new experiences and contexts. Teaching also requires abilities to communicate ideas clearly and to foster problem solving with an ongoing desire to learn, (Darling-Hammond, Weir & Johnson, 2009). For pre-service teachers to grow in these skills and to extend their abilities, teaching experiences need to be organized outside of their normal cultural and social environments within unfamiliar school settings. This paper discusses a pilot international immersion program where pre-service teachers from a university in Australia experienced an intensive program based in a school located on a remote island in the northern province of Vanuatu. It is argued that such an experience provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop a consciousness around global issues outside their normal experiences and context.

**Improving learning for student teachers**

With changing and emerging technologies and shifting political and economic agendas, graduate teachers are entering schools located within a society characterized by increased interconnectedness, cultural pluralism and competition for resources (Merryfield, 2000). However, the trends in internationalization of higher education are not realised to the same extent within teacher education, with some reports (cf. Longview Foundation, 2008) suggesting that the majority of graduate teachers begin their careers with little more than superficial knowledge of global experiences. Therefore engagement of pre-service teachers in international contexts is needed in order to provide opportunities in the development of a greater consciousness of their role as global citizens. Teacher education programs, it is suggested, should respond to four main goals that have been drawn from the work of Merryfield (1994) and Zeicher (2010). These include:
(1) Developing pre-service teachers’ socio-cultural consciousness to foster appreciation that others have views of the world that may be significantly different.

(2) Learning more about the histories and cultures of the world in order to develop an awareness of prevailing world conditions.

(3) Fostering greater intercultural competence, with an awareness of the impact of ideas and practices of key traits and mechanisms of world systems.

(4) Enabling critical examination of the causes and consequences of global injustices, the problems of choice confronting individuals and nations to encourage critical reflection towards a transformative position within respect to society.

These goals were articulated into the Vanuatu experience discussed in this paper. Being immersed within an unfamiliar culture and new teaching context, expectations for learning within this international experience were positioned so that these student teachers were challenged to adapt and engage in learning new things at all times (Meirs, 2009). However it should be noted that it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the impact that both cultures experienced from this immersion, rather the focus of the discussion is centred on the structures of the international experiences and some of the outcomes achieved by the immersion project.

The planned goals for the Vanuatu immersion embraced the development of teacher pedagogy, values and attitudes and were designed to:

- Provide pre-service teachers with a wider range of learning and teaching experiences than those available in a formal lecture, tutorial or practicum setting;
- Assist pre-service teachers in gaining a heightened awareness of ethical, social and cultural issues within a globalized context;
- Enhance the development of pedagogy and understanding of education and schooling from a different cultural perspective;
• Enable pre-service teachers to reflect upon and communicate the impact of their learning within an international context;
• Contribute to a global community in a tangible way that could make a difference; and
• Experience professional learning as a collaborative and enriching opportunity for growth.

This immersion project extended the generally accepted goals of global education to view the experience as enriching of professional practice, but also reciprocally beneficial through the formation of collaborative learning networks of school leaders and teachers located in significantly different contexts. In this sense the experience was constructed around a model of community-centred praxis (Singer, 1994), in which the partner school identified its own specific curriculum needs with suggested ideas for solutions formulated through a collaborative process, engaging the school, the university academics and the pre-service teachers partaking in the immersion experience. This model differs from normal teacher professional experience programs which often positions pre-service teachers as junior and powerless students, partnered with a teaching expert, supervised by university representatives. In this model the professional experience was a collaborative exercise in which the pre-service teacher was both learner and autonomous teacher, working in partnership with the existing school staff, alongside and mentored by the university academics. This collaboration was a central tenet to the success of the program empowering both the school staff and the pre-service teachers to develop global perspectives of education. Thus the Vanuatu immersion endeavoured to develop pre-service teachers who were able to exercise ethical and professional autonomy in a pluralistic society.

**Description of the Vanuatu school immersion context**

In July 2011, a team of six student teachers and two academic staff from the Faculty of Education at Australian Catholic University (ACU) made the inaugural immersion to Arep School, located in Sola,
Vanuatu, a small Pacific-Island nation located to the east of Australia. Sola is a less economically developed area with limited electricity and water that is drawn mainly from streams and bore wells. Transport mainly consists of walking along dirt roads, often muddy and slippery, rather than the normal paved roads of an urban centre, or riding in the tray of an utility truck, when available, if the distances were longer.

From over 40 expressions of interest, 14 applications were received, with six pre-service teachers selected for the project. The successful applicants were enrolled in different teacher preparation courses and had varying amounts of classroom and school experience spanning early childhood, primary and secondary programs. All were female and of various ages, family responsibilities and backgrounds. For all the pre-service teachers this was their first experience of living and working in a remote community in another culture, within a school context that in many aspects was vastly different from their urban school experiences in Sydney, Australia.

In Sola, Arep school functions as a primary/secondary school which shares the same grounds but operates as separate schooling units. The secondary school had approximately 170 pupils enrolled with the majority of pupils being in the years 7-9. Secondary education is not compulsory in Vanuatu and therefore is often limited in access for many children. Expectations to achieve well at school are high and the delivery of the curriculum is traditional and exam orientated. Currently the completion rates for students to year 12 are low with only 15 pupils being present in the current final year class. Junior secondary class sizes are between 30-45 pupils depending on the curriculum subject. The high school also serves as a boarding school for students from surrounding islands. Most teachers, including the principal, lived on site and thus were involved in extra curricula school activities such as cultural nights and sport. The secondary teachers were mainly two year trained. Some teachers lacked experience and teaching qualifications, whilst others had been at the school for extended periods of time.
Within the school, differences were also evident in the physical spaces within classrooms where standard equipment found in Australian classrooms, such as computing technology and internet access, were not yet available with significant limitations of consumable resources such as paper, pens and chalk. The classrooms were built without wall insulation and glass in the windows, therefore the external components of weather and noise had more direct impact on the experience of the classroom. Pupil numbers in classes were large with desks arranged in rows. Direct instruction was the main strategy of teaching with limited student oral participation in lessons. Thus the living and working conditions were different to those normally experienced by our Australian pre-service teachers, placing significant demands on the resilience of the participants to live and work in conditions vastly different to their normal socio-cultural and educational contexts. The dynamics of such a diversity ensured that these pre-service teachers were suitably challenged in their preconceptions and understandings of diverse cultures and global issues of equity, creating many opportunities for sustained critical reflection on a variety of issues.

Reflections on the Vanuatu school immersion

Yoon et al., (2007), reviewing more than 1300 experimental studies concerned with teachers' professional learning, identified that teachers who engaged in high quality professional development programs of about 50 hours or more, have an impact on student learning. Thus it was considered in order to prepare pre-service teachers well for the realities of classrooms, they need to learn about their practice whilst in practice through extended and intense school immersions (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Likewise, for graduates to be fully prepared for the global classroom there is value in practice-centred school immersion programs where pre-service teachers can experience teaching pupils who learn in different ways and engage with curriculum and assessment in school cultures that are dissimilar to the pre-service teachers’ context. Furthermore, these professional learning
opportunities are more successful if experienced in a collaborative and collegial manner where there is ample opportunity to implement teaching ideas and curriculum pedagogy learnt at university with expert support and mentoring whilst in practice (Dinham, 2009; Goodrum, 2007). These practices were founded as the core of focus of the Vanuatu immersion where the development of teaching pedagogy was informed by experience in a diverse socio-cultural setting.

The Vanuatu immersion was organized around a two week school period where the pre-service teachers were partnered with a class teacher and given open access to timetabled classes across a range of grades from years 9 -12. Whilst it is recognized that a two-week immersion is not generally a long period of time, the fact that we all lived together as a community with shared facilities gave this experience depth through the extended social and educational contexts that went beyond Yoon et al.’s (2007) recommended 50 hours of engagement. To have impact in the classroom, the pre-service teachers were asked to prepare a series of lessons focusing on co-operative learning strategies and skills of inclusion that could be utilised within any class setting regardless of age or content. These strategies were developed over a sequence of meetings prior to travel in which the participants began to form into a community of practice sharing expertise of content, previous teaching experiences and pedagogical approaches. With a specific focus on co-operative teaching strategies as a means to demonstrate and engage students and teachers in learning, it was envisaged these practices within the classroom would form the basis of professional development, facilitated by the academic staff, for the teachers at Arep School. The school executive at Arep school, in consultation within the teaching staff, developed the foundation of the professional development, drawing upon the expertise of the academics. For most school staff, this was the first professional development that they had participated in within the last 10 years. Therefore a series of workshops were implemented around the teaching strategies that the pre-service student teachers were introducing into the classrooms and modelling to the staff at Arep school. This facilitated dialogue and
shared learning with the development of curriculum pedagogy and planning.

Thereby, a complex student-novice-teacher-expert relationship evolved between the university academics, university students and Arep school staff. As noted by Brady (2002, p.3) "schools are rarely perceived by educators as 'islands'. They are learning communities, and as such may benefit from external collaboration that assists teachers to improve their practice." Thus the pre-service student teachers’ practice in the classroom acted as a springboard to engage and empower the Arep staff to try different teaching strategies that moved beyond traditional classroom practices of teacher talk and student compliance.

Overall this teaching context was completely new to our pre-service teachers and for some this was not only a culture shock but a professionally challenging environment that some believed they were incapable of successfully working within. The pre-service teachers were challenged to use the little that was available, coupled with what they had prepared and bought with them from Australia to create innovative and engaging lessons for the pupils and also for their class teachers to experience and learn in different ways. A feeling of being overwhelmed, coupled with the need to recoil, required enormous support and mentoring from the university academics and assurances from their less intimidated peers that they could achieve if they were only willing to give it a go. These students were provided with clear scaffolds in ways to move forward, with constant feedback on progress with opportunities for re-teaching lessons until confidence was gained and they realized that they could do it; all strategies recommended from previous research (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Starkey et al., 2009). This mentoring relationship was a critical component of the immersion as not only did it provide a support for pre-service teachers whilst in-country, an element that is not often present in international placements, it was also able to serve as a critical lens challenging the students to develop a greater realisation of the cultural differences in understanding the world. Furthermore the intense mentoring relationship between the academic staff and university students created
rich learning opportunities with direct and critical reflection on the ‘formal’ learning within academic classes. By the end of the first week all pre-service teachers were teaching unassisted and implementing cooperative learning strategies that encouraged dialogue and engaged pupil learning in meaningful ways. Unlike many other experiences of this nature, by operating as a team with close mentoring relationships between academic staff and pre-service teachers, the program was able to develop the collaborative and collegial dynamics necessary for success.

**Insights into the outcomes of the Immersion project**

With respect to the identified goals of the project there were numerous achievements identified by the participants. These achievements were evident in both personal growth for individuals as well as professionally with the pre-service teachers developing as a community of learners. Some of these outcomes are discussed below.

The depth of learning about pedagogy for both the pre-service teachers and the academic staff was a truly successful achievement of the immersion project. The pre-service teachers’ learning was supported by their own peers who formed a professional learning community (Hord & Hirsch, 2009) who discussed issues of implementation and evaluation of the cooperative learning strategies. On numerous occasions the student teachers formed pairs to team teach and support each other in classrooms so that the school pupils could gain assistance with sharing of ideas and learning to work cooperatively. These teaching pairs provided feedback to each other and engaged in deep reflective conversations both formally and informally in order to identify how they could improve their teaching and increase pupil engagement. When success was achieved the student teachers encouraged each other to visit and observe their lessons that were often videoed and discussed within their circle of learning. As suggested by Hargreaves and Fink (2008) teachers should be encouraged to learn from each other whilst supporting each other in a
culture of shared learning. Thus the pre-service teachers became engaged in their own professional learning that was intrinsically focused on teachers as controller or facilitators of their own learning, made possible through the establishment of their own networked community immersed within a school context – a strategy suggested and supported by Mullen and Hutinger (2008). Learning was nested in authentic situations that had meaning and relevance for individuals and the group of pre-service teachers as a community of learners (Hord, 2008). Therefore, the significance of learning, it could be concluded, was consequential to the reflective partnerships and focused professional learning rather than being solely a result of time. Intense interactions and ongoing practices of briefing and debriefing enabled deep and meaningful learning to occur through mentoring practices implemented by the academics.

The learning in the program was also realised across all the desired areas, including processes of critical reflection which led the group to a realisation that although practices are constructed from different cultural and educational frameworks this does not necessarily deem them to be wrong. For example, a simple construct of time presented as a significant cultural difference. The students took with them a Western, Anglo, modern world view of time, in which everything is governed by the clock, and schools run with bells to indicate the end of teaching periods, where punctuality is imperative. However, within Vanuatu, time is often a more fluid concept that is regarded more as an approximation than an absolute. This difference of reference points meant that at times the pre-service teachers and Arep staff found themselves having to negotiate what operates as a norm. Therefore, the pre-service teachers came to adjust their expectations of punctuality whilst the Ni-Vanuatu staff also accommodated the desires of the pre-service teachers to gain timetabled access to classrooms. Whilst this issue was quite minor it serves to highlight the dualistic nature of the relationship. Through interaction the Ni-Vanuatu teachers came to understand that other approaches and understandings could be utilized within their classroom, likewise the pre-service teachers acquired new
practices and understandings reflective of the existing norms within the school. Importantly neither group saw, or argued for their position to be dominant, instead a new way of practice and knowledge was co-constructed.

Central to this co-construction was the role of the university academics, who often highlighted the processes of critical reflection required to understand the cultural differences. The university academics mentored the pre-service teachers throughout the immersion both formally and informally. Mentoring programs, and sharing across practitioner networks, both within and beyond the school, serve to strengthen professional learning (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). Formally the academics assisted the pre-service teachers in lesson plan preparation, refinement of ideas and the development of strategies, observations and feedback sessions and facilitated discussion about praxis between research and the classroom (Long, 2009). Informally at meal times, or social gatherings, conversations explored issues regarding the classroom or questions about pedagogy as a means to gain deeper understanding and a willingness to try out new ideas. Furthermore, the dialogue extended to understandings of globalization and the challenges facing certain parts of the world; with the reflection also critiquing the existing practices and understandings inherent in Australian culture. The outcomes of this for the pre-service teachers was the development of attitude that was not of seeing deficit in the 'Third World', but understanding cultural differences and being able to respond to these from a critical perspective, thereby empowering both cultures to be transformative. Being together as a community of academics and student teachers heightened the learning as we lived the teaching immersion together. For the academics it was a time to witness the integration of theory and practice as learning merged as we all reflected upon 'practice whilst in practice' (Darling-Hammond, 2011).

For the teachers at Arep Secondary School the immersion came at a time when the staff were involved in marking the midyear exams so many were grateful of the assistance within the classroom which gave
them release to attend to the duties of assessment. They gave high support to the pre-service teachers and viewed the cooperative learning activities as beneficial and not invasive to their own teaching programs and pedagogy. The professional development opportunities undertaken with the university academics also gave these teachers time to become involved in and more aware of the total school teaching environment. Ideas were shared through engagement in cooperative learning activities through which some of the key issues for their school based curriculum planning were addressed. These opportunities for professional learning confirmed the notion advanced by Mullen (2008) and Long (2009), that the more collegiality, shared responsibility and practical support school leaders, teachers, academics and pre-service teachers can provide, the better the outcomes for all participants.

The success for this inaugural program was further evidenced in the farewell received. The Principal so pleased and impressed with the program, invited the Provincial Education Officer to be present at our final school assembly. As a result of this meeting and sharing of events over the experience, the Immersion project and program structure has been taken to a meeting of all Provincial Heads and the Minister of Education in Vanuatu. Thus the willingness of educational leaders, at both the school and university level, to embrace a broad range of collegial activities which are not integral of current practice, have the potential to change the nature of schooling and teacher education.

It is in this spirit of collaboration that global teaching immersions such as the one described here, should be actively pursued and maintained so relevant and deep learning can occur for many of the stakeholders. However, partnerships such as this are only possible when true collaboration occurs. This became truly realised when we reflected upon key phrases of the local dialect including ‘Yumi Yumi’. These are words drawn from the Ni-Vanuatu language, known as Bislama, when translated into English means ‘You and Me’, and can be translated to concepts of unity and coming together. It was with this sense of welcome and acceptance that the school immersion took roots and grew into a life-changing experience both personally and
professionally for the pre-service teachers - a key hope and goal for the pilot project.

**Recommendations for practice from the Immersion project**

From the immersion project, a key recommendation for practice is focused on promoting processes that facilitate authentic collaboration between the host school, the university academics and pre-service teachers based on the needs of the school. The staff of the school must identify what they want to gain from being involved in an immersion project, which should involve the sharing of expertise from all stakeholders in order to facilitate the growth in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy. Academics can bridge the gap between schools and universities by facilitating professional learning at the school level where learning can occur for school leaders, teachers and pre-service teachers together. Thus it is the school that needs to be at the centre of focus and empowered to shape the outcomes. As argued by Campbell and Long (2012, p.26) "this model is not about the university ‘doing things to’ or gracingously with the community group, but enabling the community group to choose to do things, in partnership, with the university.”

Thus professional learning must be at the heart of an immersion program where all participants are exploring and trialling new ideas, then reflecting on how these practices impact on the current and future practice in a collegial and meaningful manner (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). This requires structured and systematic processes that allow for the identification, trial and reflection on new learning and teaching strategies whilst in practice, with strong mentoring systems of support from academics, teachers and peers as a community of learners. Mentoring is key to providing support in action, whilst individual teaching pedagogies are challenged or sustained and extended. Supervision is not a part of the process, rather the building of collegial relationships, based on shared praxis is pursued (Long, 2009).
Pre-service teachers must be given a voice and opportunities to experience the power of teacher autonomy. They need opportunities to be viewed and treated as professionals with something also to offer – a chance to show leadership and to grow as valued partners in the pursuit of knowledge and excellence. For pre-service teachers, living and working within an international context that extends personal and professional global understandings is a wonderful and rewarding outcome as it has the potential to challenge and build multi-perspectives of ways of knowing that can shape our teachers of the future. Within this immersion project the pre-service teachers brought recent classroom experience, novice energies and passionate pedagogies centred on co-operative learning strategies that complimented and extended the Arep’s school professional development program. Working with the university academics as mentors, the pre-service teachers were challenged to create sustainable resources and pedagogies that they demonstrated and shared with the school staff, as well as negotiate with the class teachers to have a reciprocal sharing of expertise. Unlike ‘normal’ professional experience programs, based on a novice-expert model of apprenticeship, where a student-teacher is subjugated to the expert-teacher, this experience required the pre-service teachers to be able to operate at the level of an experienced teacher, and work alongside the school staff as peers and colleagues.

Conclusion

Graduate teachers are entering into schooling contexts that are being challenged by the globalization and internationalization agendas which are emerging throughout society. Such changes come through the consequence of improved communication technologies entering into the classroom, as well as increased cultural diversity amongst the student population. Therefore within teacher education programs there is a range of pressures to ensure that pre-service teachers are provided with the opportunities necessary to respond to the changing dynamic of the school environment as well as engaging with the
internationalization of the higher education sector, and globalization of the broader society, (Altbarch & Knight, 2007).

In order to enhance teachers’ practice through the examination of pedagogy then as Days and Sachs (2006) argue, professional learning needs to be wanted by teachers and also have the potential to make a difference to teaching and pupil learning outcomes. Having the opportunity to plan, teach and reflect on practice whilst in practice provides stronger understanding of the interrelationships between curriculum, pedagogy and culture for pre-service teachers. The availability and continuous individual and group mentoring practices from academics, accompanied by support from peers who have been established as a school-based community of learners, has been a significant part of deep learning for all concerned in the Vanuatu Immersion project.

Therefore improving the educational outcomes for pre-service teachers, so that they are prepared to be teachers in the global classrooms of the 21st Century should be a priority for teacher education. The Vanuatu immersion reported upon in this paper supports the belief that pre-service teachers who are engaged in authentic explorations of pedagogy through intensive, rigorous experiences within international contexts are more likely to grow and succeed as effective teachers. Through supporting active learning within real-world contexts that not only challenge but engage pre-service teachers in learning about themselves and their teaching pedagogies, international immersions can serve to inform and improve teaching and thus pupil educational outcomes. Therefore it is recommended that global immersions, such as this Vanuatu experience, are encouraged and regarded as 'Yumi Yumi' – You and Me - where we belong together as a community in the quest for effective learning and teaching.
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