Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 36 | Issue 10 Article 1

2011

International Field Experience – What Do Student Teachers Learn?

Jackie Fung King Lee
Hong Kong Institute of Education, jfklee@ied.edu.hk

Recommended Citation
Lee, J. (2011). International Field Experience – What Do Student Teachers Learn?. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 36*(10).
http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n10.4

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol36/iss10/1

International Field Experience – What Do Student Teachers Learn?

Jackie Fung King Lee
Hong Kong Institute of Education
jfklee@ied.edu.hk

Abstract: This inquiry aimed to examine the benefits of having international field experience for a group of Hong Kong postgraduate student teachers who joined a six-week immersion programme in New Zealand. Through participants' reflections, interviews and programme evaluations, the present investigation found that the overseas field experience not only enriched their cultural understanding, pedagogical knowledge and skills, but also enhanced their language awareness, classroom language and recognition of different English varieties.

Introduction

The idea of cross-cultural experiential learning for teachers is not new. As early as 1969, Taylor wrote in *The World as Teacher* about the importance for teachers of crossing over to a culture different from that of their home country so as to develop a broadened perspective. In the eighties, Wilson (1982) argued that cross-cultural experience aids self-development and leads to global perspectives necessary for global education. In recent decades the need to sensitize trainee teachers to globalization has been further driven and widely acknowledged (e.g., Armstrong, 2008; Bruce, Podemski, & Anderson, 1991; Byram, 1994; Cushner, 2007) because of the migration of world cultures and increasing global contacts through international trades and travel. The new norm is that schools are more diverse, with not only diverse students with unique and challenging needs but also colleagues not recruited locally (Goodwin, 2010). Teachers are perceived as the agents responsible for cultural and global education. To address the critical need to prepare prospective teachers to meet the challenges of the interconnected world, a number of education institutions have organized overseas short-term field experiences that help student teachers develop global perspectives and language proficiency (Bodycott & Crew, 2000; Kuechle, O'Brien, & Ferguson, 1995; Olmedo & Harbon, 2010). According to Cushner and Mahon (2002), overseas student teaching provides the potential for the

greatest impact on student teachers' intercultural and international development. Heyl and McCarthy (2003) state that it is important to graduate future teachers "who think globally, have international experience, demonstrate foreign language competence, and are able to incorporate a global dimension into their teaching" (p. 3). Kissock and Richardson (2010, p. 92) add that "educators must move beyond their comfort zone to see their world from a different perspective, discover alternative solutions to problems they face and create new approaches or integrate appropriate ideas into their setting".

Some previous studies have been conducted to examine the benefits of international school placement for teachers (e.g., Armstrong, 2008; Bodycott & Crew, 2000; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990, 1992; McKay & Montgomery, 1995; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Sahin, 2008; Tang & Choi, 2004; Willard-Holt, 2001; Wilson, 1982; Woodgate-Jones, 2008). Mahan and Stachowski (1990) compared the experience of student teachers engaged in conventional in-state student teaching assignments and in cultural immersion teaching and living assignments in overseas schools. They found that overseas participants not only learnt more than their conventional counterparts but their experiences were broader, encompassing more community and global perspectives. Drawing on student teachers' reflections in questionnaires and interviews, Willard-Holt (2001) reported lasting effects derived from their overseas field experience upon their teaching as well as their personal lives – being "less prone to prejudge students based on cultural background, linguistic difference, or even learning disability", having "more patience and empathy", and becoming "more globally aware" (p. 515). In a recent study Alfaro and Quezada (2010) examined 21 biliteracy teachers who joined an in-service professional development programme in Mexico, tracing the participants' growth in global awareness with respect to the similarities and differences in the host and home country, love and passion for teaching and learning, and their gain in cross-cultural sensitivity and commitment to working with ethnically and linguistically diverse students. The findings of these studies suggest that international field experience offers teacher candidates benefits on both personal and professional levels.

The Hong Kong Situation

To become an effective English language teacher, one needs to have a strong command of the English language, good pedagogical skills and cultural awareness of the target language. In Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government has imposed a language proficiency requirement on all English language teachers in local primary and secondary schools since 2001. In 2003, the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) recommended in its Final Report that language

teachers should be adequately prepared in terms of proficiency, subject knowledge and pedagogy. There are clear specifications with regard to the training and qualifications to be attained by new English language teachers with effect from the 2004/05 school year. To satisfy the higher demands on the language and teaching competence of English language teachers, the Hong Kong SAR Government has taken one significant step to support local teachers to boost their standards. Short-term international experiences have become a required component of all English student teachers undertaking Bachelor of Education and pre-service full-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education programmes since the early 2000s. However, despite the huge investment of financial resources into the managing of the study abroad programmes in Hong Kong, little is known about how overseas learning has impacted the teacher candidates. Findings from this survey will contribute to a better understanding of how international experiences can be professionally important for student teachers. The present inquiry attempts to find out (1) in what ways the international field experience increases participants' understanding of classroom teaching, (2) how the international field experience broadens and deepens participants' cultural awareness and understanding, and (3) how the international field experience enhances student teachers' English language awareness.

The Present Inquiry

Participants

The participants included 17 Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Primary) English language student teachers who joined a six-week language immersion programme in Auckland, New Zealand. They boarded with local families and became an integral part of the family throughout their six-week stay. Such homestay experience allowed the student teachers to interact closely with local people in a wide range of activities – from daily routines to special events and celebrations, which in turn enabled the student teachers to deepen their understanding of the target language and the local community.

Of the 17 participants, 15 (including 14 females and one male, with an average age of 26 agreed to participate in the present inquiry. They had varied teaching experiences, from teaching English in mainland China for two years, to assistant teaching in Hong Kong, to their first practicum experience in New Zealand during the immersion programme. Their overseas experience also varied: five had lived and studied in English-speaking countries such as Australia, Britain and the United States for some years (including Chloe, Ellen, Ida, Rita and Sharon) (pseudonyms), two had had holidays in European countries, and eight had never visited an English-speaking country before. All of the 15 participants wrote reflections about their learning during the immersion programme and completed the

two post-immersion questionnaires administered by the host and the home institutions respectively. Six of them (namely Ada, Chloe, Ellen, Doris, May and Rita) consented to attend an individual interview upon their return to Hong Kong.

Programme Design

The two major aims of the Postgraduate English Language Immersion Programme were (1) to provide novice teachers with the opportunity to participate in an intensive English language and cultural awareness course at a university in an English-speaking country so as to enhance their language competence and cultural understanding, and (2) to develop their pedagogical knowledge and to complete a teaching practicum while they were overseas. To achieve these objectives, all the participants were required to undertake all the sessions of the programme, including university language classes and strategy workshops, field experience and community activities.

The main aim of language classes and strategy workshops was to increase the English language proficiency of the student teachers and to extend their understanding of the teaching and learning of English in New Zealand. These included professional reading, error analysis, and introduction to teaching strategies commonly used in New Zealand, including reciprocal teaching, shared reading, Venn diagram, among others.

The field experience component enabled student teachers to observe the New Zealand education system in action and to put the pedagogical theories learnt into practice in local primary classrooms. The 15 student teachers were placed in four local primary schools for their 10-day teaching practice, with two schools taking four participants each, one school taking five and one school taking two. All host schools and associate teachers, prior to student placement, received detailed and relevant information about the programme and about the student teachers. The expectations of each school/associate teacher were documented in the information packs sent out. All the student teachers undertook classroom observations in their placement school, conducted team or individual English language teaching with support from their own associate teacher and, were involved in lesson planning, school activities and playground duties. The Coordinator of the overseas partnering institution kept regular contact with associate teachers and school staff during placement to ensure that the obligations of both the school and the students were met.

Another feature of the programme was a focus on seven community “case studies”. The intention was to provide a full-day focus on an issue that enabled the participants to gain theoretical and practical insights into language learning in New Zealand. The case studies were:

1. Chinese students in New Zealand schools (including a school visit)
2. Microteaching (including a small group teaching session)
3. Multicultural education (including a school visit)
4. Environmental education (including a school visit and a bush walk)
5. Wearable Arts (including a practical activity in which the student teachers had to make their own clothes using recyclable materials and demonstrate their final products)
6. Visual language (including a film screening)
7. Integrated teaching (including a field trip to a zoo)

Methods

To facilitate validation of data, methodological triangulation was adopted. This study used mainly qualitative research tools, which were supplemented by quantitative research measures. According to Colón-Muñiz, SooHoo and Brignoni (2010), reflection is the most appropriate way for participants to take note of and realize how overseas experiences impact on them as future teachers. Each of the 15 participants who agreed to participate in the study was required to keep a journal to record their daily experiences in the schools. Classroom observation guidelines were given to help the student teachers evaluate the classroom layout, the associate teachers' teaching strategies and their practices in monitoring student progress. They were also encouraged to reflect on their experiences, and at the conclusion of the programme to write about these in reflective journals, in which they evaluated their own learning, with a special focus on class observation and teaching practice, cultural understanding and language development. They were advised to respond to the following in their reflective journals:

1. Write a reflection on the class observations and teaching during your field experience.
2. How have various aspects of the immersion programme contributed to the development of your language proficiency – a description and evaluation of what you have seen and done and how this has enhanced/improved your English proficiency?
3. How have various aspects of the immersion programme contributed to your enhanced awareness of the relationship between language and culture?

Two post-programme questionnaires, one administered by the overseas partnering institution and one by the home institution, asked participants to rate the immersion programme in terms of its effectiveness. The questionnaire used by the overseas partner consisted mainly of open-ended questions to encourage the student teachers to express their feelings fully (see Appendix 1) and was qualitative in nature. The evaluation used by the home institution included evaluation questions on a four-point likert scale – satisfied /

achieved / useful, etc. to a large extent, to a considerable extent, to some extent, and not satisfied / achieved / useful, etc. at all (see Table 1 below). The responses were coded ranging from 1 (to a large extent) to 4 (not at all). The student teachers were also invited to write additional comments under each question. Owing to length constraints, only the questions relating to the focus of this paper are presented. All the 15 participants completed each of the two questionnaires.

Six voluntary participants also attended a follow-up individual structured interview on their return to Hong Kong (see Appendix 2). The interviews aimed to investigate in-depth their various kinds of learning during the overseas field experience. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

While the quantitative data collected in the post-programme questionnaires were tabulated and the internal consistency estimate of reliability of test scores was measured using Cronbach's alpha, the qualitative data collected through evaluations, reflections and interviews, following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) approach, were read repeatedly until themes were constructed so as to obtain insights into the student teachers' emerging professional development. To help improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of the data, member checking was adopted. All the data collated by the research assistant were cross-checked and reviewed by the principal researcher.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Findings of the Questionnaire Survey

Table 1 shows the findings collected in the post-immersion questionnaires administered by the home institution. All the questions were categorized on two dimensions – (1) programme objectives and (2) programme components. While the four items on programme objectives measured the extent to which the objectives were achieved, the seven items on programme components measured the extent to which each of the major components was useful to achieve the programme objectives. Cronbach's alpha for the first dimension was 0.765, and that for the second was 0.834, indicating that the test items were intercorrelated and the findings were reliable.

The means for the questions ranged from 1.8 to 2.53. Among all the items, the questions on school visits, classroom teaching and cultural understanding received the highest ratings. Thirteen participants (87%) indicated that the immersion programme had enhanced their understanding of the teaching and learning of English and the education system of New Zealand to a large/considerable extent, and two to some extent. School visits and observations were regarded by 12 participants (80%) and classroom teaching by 13 participants (87%) as the major components of the programme to help achieve the

programme aims to a large/considerable extent. Meanwhile, 12 participants (80%) indicated that the immersion programme helped broaden and deepen their awareness of the culture of New Zealand to a large/considerable extent, and the other three participants to some extent. Fourteen participants (93.3%), on the other hand, indicated that the immersion experience further developed their English language proficiency to at least some extent. These findings indicate that through the various programme components, the major aims of the immersion programme, to enhance the student teachers' language competence and cultural understanding, and to develop their pedagogical knowledge, were mostly achieved.

	Programme objectives	Mean	Std. dev.
1.	Overall, to what extent were you satisfied with the immersion programme?	2.13	0.52
2.	The Postgraduate English Language Immersion Programme (PELIP) aimed to further develop your English language proficiency. To what extent was this aim achieved?	2.53	0.64
3.	PELIP aimed to broaden and deepen your awareness of the culture of the host country, in particular the English-speaking environment. To what extent was this aim achieved?	1.93	0.70
4.	PELIP aimed to enhance your understanding of the teaching and learning of English and the education system of the host country. To what extent was this aim achieved?	2.07	0.46
	Programme components	**Mean**	**Std. dev.**
5.	To what extent did you find the language work useful to help you achieve the programme aims?	2.40	0.83
6.	To what extent did you find the socio-cultural activities useful to help you achieve the programme aims?	2.13	0.64
7.	To what extent did you find the community-based activities useful to help you achieve the programme aims?	2.43	0.76
8.	To what extent did you find the school visits and observation useful to help you achieve the programme aims?	1.8	0.77
9.	To what extent did you find the classroom teaching useful to help you achieve the programme aims?	1.93	0.59
10.	To what extent did you find the homestay accommodation useful to help you achieve the programme aims?	2.13	0.99
11.	To what extent has the in-school teaching experience been facilitative to the enhancement of your English language proficiency?	2.27	0.59

Table 1. Findings of the post-immersion questionnaire survey administered by the home institution

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data collected by various research tools were codified as “homestay”, “friendship building”, “New Zealand culture”, “English proficiency and communication skills”, “New Zealand’s natural environment”, “learning about teaching and New Zealand education”, “vision broadening” and “developing life skills”, To answer the three research questions of the present paper, the codes were categorized into these themes – (1) learning about teaching, (2) learning about culture, and (3) language enhancement.

Learning about Teaching

The international experience proved to be an eye-opener for a number of participants as it enabled them to see how a different education system worked. Although Hong Kong primary schools adopt a specialist teaching approach (i.e., a teacher specializing in one subject), and New Zealand schools a generalist approach (i.e., a teacher teaching all subjects in one class, except for music and physical education), the difference did not prevent the teacher candidates from engaging in the field experience. The differing practices enabled this group of student teachers to appreciate the opportunity to integrate English teaching and learning in different disciplinary areas. As found in the programme evaluation administered by the overseas partnering institution, 14 participants indicated that the parts of the course from which they gained the most learning were the sessions on teaching, including the field experience, school visits and strategy workshops. Five of them expressed a wish to have a longer field experience.

The following discussion of the student teachers’ learning in relation to teaching is organized according to four categories that emerged in the process of data analysis – teaching strategies, the learning environment, classroom management strategies, and teaching characteristics.

Teaching Strategies

All the qualitative data sources revealed that the participants were impressed by the range of teaching strategies and approaches commonly adopted in New Zealand schools. For example, Ada mentioned in her reflection that through university classes, school visits and classroom teaching, she learnt useful teaching methods and realized how to integrate environmental issues in her teaching. In the programme evaluation administered by the overseas partnering institution, all the participants indicated that they were prepared to

take some strategies and materials home for their future teaching, as shown in Table 2.

Teaching strategies	Frequency	Teaching resources	Frequency
Reading strategies	9	Print-rich environment	5
Six thinking hats	5	Six thinking hats	3
Think, pair, share	4	Internet materials	3
PMI	3	Picture cards	2
Reciprocal teaching	3	Smart boards	2
KWL	3	films	2
Visual language	3	Classroom library corner	1
LEOTC (Learning English outside the classroom)	3	Flash cards	1
Venn diagram	2	Venn diagram	1
Split dictation	2	Teachers' resource centre	1
Picture sequence	2		

Table 2. Key teaching strategies and resources to be used in Hong Kong

In the post-immersion interviews, all the six student teachers reiterated that they had learnt a lot of useful teaching strategies. Doris mentioned that the new methodologies learnt (e.g., six thinking hats, World of Wearable Arts, reading recovery) could be used as new inputs to improve teaching in Hong Kong. Chloe expressed her preference for generalist teaching in the lower forms (primary 1 – 3), as she felt that subject knowledge at this level was not as essential as that for the upper forms, and that the integrated curriculum could allow learners to apply the newly acquired knowledge in different areas. Another difference which impressed the Hong Kong participants was the prevalent student-centred approach adopted in New Zealand classrooms. Chloe was impressed by the frequent individual assessments through conferencing in class and ability grouping of students without labeling them. May indicated her appreciation of the use of reading recovery and running records to cater to students' different reading abilities. She also valued the emphasis on logical thinking rather than rote learning in New Zealand classrooms, as evident in New Zealand teachers' acceptance of wrong spellings which approximate the sound patterns. Ellen, meanwhile, appreciated her associate teacher's design of various activities (e.g., treasure hunt) to develop students' independent learning skills.

The Learning Environment

All participants indicated in their reflections that they were impressed by the very different learning environments in New Zealand, as compared with Hong Kong. The very spacious New Zealand classroom settings where there were a lot of resources available (e.g., games, educational toys, costumes for drama, a library corner) allowed different kinds of teaching activities to be held and facilitated students' independent learning. The posting of students' works on walls, as recognition of their contribution, created a print-rich environment and made the student teachers realize the importance of catering to the emotional needs of students in the learning process. To Doris, the fact that the teacher and the children designed their own classroom was a factor in promoting their sense of belonging. Sharon commented that the classroom setting and atmosphere could affect students' participation. In her view, one reason for Hong Kong students' unwillingness to speak English in class was the formal teaching environment. In her New Zealand classroom, Sharon found that the students' participation was fostered by the way in which they sat in a circle on the mat and freely shared news about themselves every morning.

Apart from the relaxed physical classroom setting, another aspect which drew the Hong Kong participants' attention was the supportive learning environment. Good rapport was built between the teacher and children, and the children were willing to take risks in their construction of knowledge. In the post-immersion interview, May alluded to the advantage of creating a supportive learning atmosphere. She found that her students were actively involved in class activities and were not ashamed of making mistakes because of the supportive relationships built between the teacher and students, and among students. May also observed that her associate teacher never used a cross for mistakes in exercise books; instead she would draw two eyes to remind students to watch out. What particularly appealed to May was the emphasis on the learning process in New Zealand classrooms. She compared the differences between New Zealand and Hong Kong in her written reflection:

> I think the main difference of teaching between New Zealand and Hong Kong is that in New Zealand the approach was learner-oriented, while in Hong Kong the approach was exam-oriented. For me, I love the approach in New Zealand ... This is because the learners would get the real benefit in a learner-oriented environment.

It was also noticed that New Zealand teachers, acting as facilitators, encouraged students to think independently rather than giving them direct answers. For example, Ellen, in her written reflection, described how her associate teacher formulated inquiry-based learning and student-centred classrooms:

> My host teacher developed an environment in which genuine conversations took place. She used prompts that provoke thought and showed that there may be no one

right answer to the comment or question. For example, she said, "I wonder why …", "That was a strange way for the story to end …", or "Tell me more about …". For the students, going back to the text to justify, to find the answer, or to check accuracy was a way to become a thoughtful person.

Though the student teachers supplied many compliments for what they saw in New Zealand classrooms, they understood that not all the learning and observations there could be brought back to Hong Kong, and that adaptations should be made. An example was found in Ada's reflection. Ada felt that although visual cues could enhance learning, the creative artworks and models hanging all over the classroom would cause distraction to students. Her suggestion was to place them in a corner instead. It is pleasing to find that the student teachers not only learnt how a different education system worked through the immersion programme, but also to appreciate the differences and reflect on what modifications could be made to enhance their future teaching in Hong Kong.

Classroom Management Strategies

Classroom management is a concern for many novice teachers (Stoughton, 2007). During the overseas school placement and the school visits, the student teachers observed a number of useful classroom management strategies in action. For example, they noticed the common use of clapping and number countdowns as an attention alert, as well as the use of the pointing system to reinforce good behaviour and performances. In their reflections, Ada and Ann indicated that they were impressed by the classroom behaviour agreements developed between their associate teachers and the students. To Ada, the practice of involving students in establishing classroom rules made them feel that they were respected and treated as equal members in the classroom. Ellen, meanwhile, noted her associate teacher's regular review of behaviour with students and the peer mediation approach, through which students were invited to comment on the types of behaviour they demonstrated in class so as to discourage unwanted behaviour.

Another noteworthy phenomenon in New Zealand classrooms was the harmonious relationship built between teachers and students, as noted by all the student teachers in their reflections. They noticed that New Zealand teachers used a lot of praise to shape students' behaviour. For example, Christie noticed her associate teacher's frequent use of "Thank you" to students whenever they followed the instructions or demonstrated good behaviour. Likewise, Ann learnt how to praise students for their good behaviour, and included the example "I really like the way Peri is doing her work quietly" in her reflection. Echoing these views, May remarked in the interview that New Zealand teachers did not attempt to control students via the exercise of authority, but designed enjoyable

activities and gave clear instructions to gain students' attention.

This inquiry demonstrates that instead of adopting an assertive discipline model, as commonly practised by many Hong Kong teachers, the student teachers developed an attitude change because of the overseas teaching experience. Seeing positive interactions between New Zealand teachers and children as conducive to learning, the student teachers developed a preference for the humanistic discipline model, which emphasizes the importance of building a harmonious relationship with students.

Teaching Characteristics

Attitudinal gains that accrue as a result of the immersion experience have been found to be more profound than language proficiency gains (Bodycott & Crew, 2000). All the student teachers in this inquiry expressed positive changes in terms of teaching characteristics, not only because of actual experience but also because of the daily reflection. Among the many attitudinal gains, increased confidence was clearly perceived by student teachers as an important outcome of their overseas field experience, as the following quotations taken from the reflections by Ada and Vicky illustrate:

> I have a lot of chances to ask questions during the morning tea break, lunch time and after school. She [the associate teacher] shared a lot of teaching methods and strategies with me. I found that I speak louder than before and I have more confidence in speaking in front of students. (Ada)
>
> We always need to do oral presentation in classes, either individually or in group work. It provides an opportunity for us to speak more. In the past, I was quite afraid of speaking in front of audience even though I made a good preparation beforehand. However, I start getting used to this now ... Now, I can just write down some points. Then, I can express what I want to talk fluently… Five minutes talk would not be a challenging task for me now. (Vicky)

Another important change noted was the participants' attitude change towards teaching and learning. In their post-immersion interviews, Doris expressed her wish to be a facilitator rather than an authority figure in the classroom. Chloe believed that teachers should be encouraging, caring and creative. May felt the need to create a student-centred classroom, emphasizing the learning process rather than the result. She made a further comment on her changed view about "good students":

> Before going to New Zealand, I thought everything should be controlled by teachers. Good students are obedient and do what teachers tell them. After that, I have changed my mind. Now, I think good students are those who are actively involved and are not afraid of making mistakes in learning.

To conclude this section, it is obvious that the international placement equipped the Hong Kong student teachers with new teaching ideas, skills, strategies, and competence, and provided the appropriate amount of cognitive dissonance while helping them transfer their learning to their future work. It is pleasing to find that five out of the six interviewees, upon their return from New Zealand, expressed enhanced interest in English language teaching. Their increased love and passion for teaching, congruent with the finding of Alfaro and Quezada's (2010) study, was attributable to their observation of the joy of learning and teaching in New Zealand classrooms. This positive attitudinal change has the potential to benefit all of their future students. The only student teacher who had reservations was Ada, who indicated that the teaching experience in New Zealand demotivated her to some extent. Thinking that her students spoke very good English and that her associate teacher was very experienced, she believed that her students had learnt very little from her. Ada's view indicates that it is important to help student teachers get over the shock by helping them turn their feeling of inadequacy into a desire to learn and set more realistic expectations of themselves in an authentic English environment.

Learning about Culture

According to Cushner and Mahon (2002), overseas student teaching provides the potential for the most immense impact on pre-service teachers' intercultural and international development. This view is supported by the findings in the present inquiry. The university classes, school visits and social interactions with local people enabled the pre-service teachers to learn about different values and develop appreciation of the life and culture of New Zealanders. As found in the written reflections, how the local New Zealanders spoke, thought and lived had an impact on the student teachers. This varied from the learning of some social greetings (e.g., "How's your day?") to food names originated from different countries (e.g., the Mexican *Nachos*, the Indian *Roti*, the Australian *Vegemite*) to words borrowed from Maori (e.g., *hongi*, *koru*, *kiwi*). Another example mentioned by four student teachers in their reflections is New Zealanders' love of the environment. Rita noted that their experience of Wearable Arts and the visit to the environmental school made her aware of the need to protect the environment. Sharing the same view, Christie indicated that she had developed a commitment to save water and electricity, and to sort recyclables as a result of her immersion experience.

Another pleasing change was some participants' more open attitude towards other cultures and people following their exposure to New Zealand's multicultural society. In the post-immersion interview, May observed that:

> From the immersion programme, I learnt that people can be so different. For culture, I become more open-minded to accept others – multicultural people. It is beyond my expectation and knowledge. I have now greater acceptance of individual differences, for example, value systems, religion and food.

Similarly, Ann also learnt to appreciate other cultures, as indicated in her written reflection:

> We (the host family and Ada) have shared a lot of cultures through various topics such as cooking, hobbies, work and living styles… I am always appreciative of their living styles, their food and their way of communication. I am eager to learn from their cultures and would like to show them our own culture.

The immersion programme also provided a valuable opportunity for the student teachers to evaluate their attitudes towards life. In the interviews, while Chloe appreciated the kindness, support and care shown by the school teachers and her host lady in New Zealand, Doris admitted that many Hong Kong people, including herself, had spent too much time on the internet for irrelevant things, without showing much concern for the people around. Both Chloe and Doris believed that the immersion programme had had a positive impact on their own personal development.

Through acculturation, the student teachers in the present inquiry expanded their cultural awareness and demonstrated affective maturation. They showed better appreciation and respect for differences in others and other cultures. This inquiry therefore confirms the assertions of other scholars (e.g., Armstrong, 2008; Wilson, 1982) that cross-cultural experience enables teacher candidates to develop a deeper understanding of culture.

Language Enhancement

Extensive and intensive interactions with native speakers are useful means to raising language proficiency levels (Coleman, 1997). The positive impacts of immersion programmes on participants' language development have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Crew & Bodycott, 2001; Tang & Choi, 2004). A number of student teachers mentioned in their reflections that their speaking and listening skills had improved through university classes, homestay and field experience. They learnt not only local language (e.g., *brownies*, *veggies*, *barbie*, *hokey pokey*), but also the intonation and common expressions (e.g., *honey*, *darling*, *Have a good day!*) used by New Zealanders. Carol put it succinctly: "In the homestay family and school placement when you could not speak Cantonese with the people around you, it was one of the best ways to enhance English proficiency in a foreign country."

The benefit of the language development was not confined to student teachers who had been raised in Hong Kong. Those who had lived abroad also appreciated the language gains. For example, Chloe, who had previously studied in the UK for seven years, compared the authentic English she learnt in New Zealand with the unnatural English she learnt in Hong Kong, and mentioned her increased ability to interact with speakers with different accents. It is also encouraging to find the more liberal attitude that she developed towards different varieties of English as a result of the immersion experience. In her reflection, Chloe wrote:

> During the immersion programme, I am given opportunities to communicate with native English speakers most of the time at school and at home, which enhances my English communication skills for academic and daily life. From time to time, I tend to speak too formal English which is not authentic and natural to native English speakers. For example, I use the sentence structure like "… that …" (e.g., *I went to the beach that Stella is going to tomorrow*), or use formal words for written English like "whom" and "hence". .. I have opportunities to talk to native English speakers with different accents. I am getting used to the New Zealand accent now. I think it is important to be able to understand English speakers with different accents.

The one-to-one mentoring setting in the 10-day teaching practice allowed the student teachers to interact closely with their own associate teacher, from whom they learnt a lot of effective classroom language to manage the class, give clear instructions, scaffold questions, respond to students and assess their learning. For example, Sharon learnt how to phrase questions so as to elicit extended responses from students and to assess their understanding. She wrote in her reflection:

> If we want to check how well the student knows about a dragon, we do not ask "Do you know what a dragon is?" since there will only be a one-word answer, either "yes" or "no". Teachers should ask in a way that can lead students to deeper thinking – "What is your understanding of …?" or "What do you know about …?" or "Tell me something about…"

Some student teachers felt an urgent need to increase their own English proficiency because many of their students were English-speaking. Carol mentioned in her reflection that her students spoke quite quickly, and she had to concentrate to understand them. She was eager to look up new words used by her students when reading their work, which resulted in an extension of her own vocabulary. Vicky made the following comment about her own pronunciation in front of her students: "We needed to speak clearly in the split dictation. It made me aware of my pronunciation problems of some words such as *house* and *horse*, *glass* and *grass*, and so on."

In the present inquiry all participants, regardless of their previous cultural and language backgrounds indicated that they had made language gains through the

immersion programme. This included the five student teachers who had previously studied overseas. In addition to the homestay, the close contact with their students and the collegial dialogues with school teachers presented a strong, positive drive for this group of pre-service teachers to be more aware of their English competence and manage the language demands of the school placement. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the data included in the present study were only the participants' self-reports, which were not supported by objective language tests. Learning a foreign or second language is a long-term process. It would be unrealistic to claim that a short-term immersion programme would result in any significant language improvement. It is hoped that the heightened language awareness resulting from the overseas experience will constitute a drive for the student teachers to take further measures to improve their English proficiency after their return to Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The findings of the present inquiry support those of related studies (e.g., Cushner, 2007; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001) and reveal the many benefits of providing international field experience for novice teachers. The overseas field experience armed this group of novice teachers with new teaching ideas, skills, strategies, and knowledge, at least some of which they indicated would not be available to them in Hong Kong. The difference between the two education systems they experienced encouraged them to reflect on the link between pedagogical theory and practice. Under the guidance of the associate teachers and the staff of the overseas partnering institution, they learnt to appreciate the similarities and differences between the two education systems, and understand that the different ways of doing things could enrich their pre-service teacher training. Showing their critical thinking in the process, the participants were able to question professional practice in the host country and in their home town, and appreciate the importance of making adaptations so as to enjoy the respective strengths of the two systems.

Participants reported that their intercultural sensitivity and openness to cultural diversity were enhanced as a result of their combined overseas programme of practicum, university programme and homestay. Changes in the participants' acceptance and understanding of people of different ethnic backgrounds also appeared as a result of this integrated immersion programme.

There was also evidence that extensive and intensive interactions with native speakers during their practicum abroad helped enhance the pre-service teachers' language awareness, the effectiveness of their classroom language and their recognition of different

varieties of English, all of which are essential attributes of English language teachers.

In view of the positive and valuable transformation in individuals that may not be easily achieved by other means, it is highly recommended that the provision of immersion experience in a foreign culture, even for a short time, should be included in initial teacher education programmes. Nevertheless, there may be occasions when student teachers feel inadequate in terms of their teaching experience and their English proficiency in an authentic English environment. It is important for the home and host institutions to help them turn their feeling of inadequacy into a desire to learn and set more realistic expectations of themselves in an overseas immersion programme.

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the survey focused on the student teachers' perspectives on the immersion programme. Several other important aspects that could have added depth and breadth to this study were excluded. These included the views of the programme coordinator and tutors of the overseas partnering institution, associate teachers of the placement schools and host families. Future researchers could add these perspectives so as to complement the findings of this study. Another limitation of this inquiry is that there has been no study of the impact of the overseas experience on the participants' teaching, and it is not possible to make claims about the lasting impact of this experience on their professional choices in their future career. Future studies might involve a follow-up longitudinal study which follows the career path of the participants in the years following their graduation in order to gauge whether the international field experience has any immediate or lasting impact on their professional lives.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the two reviewers and Professor Peter Collins for their valuable comments on the earlier draft of this article. I am especially grateful to Dr Angel Ma for her useful advice on statistical tests. Thanks are also due to the students and the overseas centre that were involved in the immersion programme.

References

Alfaro, C., & Quezada, R. L. (2010). International teacher professional development: Teacher reflections of authentic teaching and learning experiences. *Teaching Education*, *21*(1), 47-59.

Armstrong, N. F. (2008). Teacher education in a global society: Facilitating global literacy for preservice candidates through international field experiences. *Teacher Education and Practice*, *21*(4), 490-506.

Bodycott, P., & Crew, V. (2000). Living the language: The value of short-term overseas English language immersion programs. *The Language Teacher*, *24*(9), 27-33.

Bruce, M. G., Podemski, R. S., & Anderson, C. M. (1991). Developing a global perspective: Strategies for teacher education programs. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *42*(1), 21-27.

Byram, M. (1994). Residence abroad - <<fieldwork>> in pre-service teacher development. In *The European dimension in pre- and in-service language teacher development: New directions (Triangle 12)* (pp. 67-87). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Coleman, J. A. (1997). Residence abroad within language study. *Language Teaching*, *30*, 1-20.

Colón-Muñiz, A., SooHoo, S., & Brignoni, E. (2010). Language, culture and dissonance: A study course for globally minded teachers with possibilities for catalytic transformation. *Teaching Education*, *21*(1), 61-74.

Crew, V., & Bodycott, P. (2001). Reflections on short term study and residence abroad. In P. Bodycott & V. Crew (Eds.), *Language and cultural immersion* (pp. 141-149). Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Cushner, K. (2007). The role of experience in the making of internationally-minded teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *34*(1), 27-39.

Cushner, K., & Mahon, J. (2002). Overseas student teaching: Affecting personal, professional, and global competencies in an age of globalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *6*(1), 44-58.

Goodwin, A. L. (2010). Globalization and the preparation of quality teachers: Rethinking knowledge domains for teaching. *Teaching Education*, *21*(1), 19-32.

Heyl, J. D., & McCarthy, J. (2003). International education and teacher preparation in the US. Paper presented at the Conference on Global Challenges and US Higher Education: National Needs and Policy Implications. Retrieved June 5, 2010, from http://ducis.jhfc.duke.edu/archives/globalchallenges/pdf/heyl_paper.pdf

Kissock, C., & Richardson, P. (2010). Calling for action within the teaching profession: It is time to internationalize teacher education. *Teaching Education*, *21*(1), 89-101.

Kuechle, J., O'Brien, R., & Ferguson, P. (1995). A collaborative student teaching program in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. *Action in Teacher Education*, *17*(2), 36-39.

Mahan, J. M., & Stachowski, L. (1990). New horizons: Student teaching abroad to enrich understanding of diversity. *Action in Teacher Education*, *12*(3), 13-21.

Mahan, J. M., & Stachowski, L. (1992). Self-reported reshaping effects of foreign student teaching upon young teachers. *Education*, *112*(3), 329-346.

McKay, J. W., & Montgomery, J. (1995). Changes in perceptions: A comparative study of the experiential learning of international student teachers. Paper presented at the

American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting. San Francisco, CA.

Olmedo, I., & Harbon, L. (2010). Broadening our sights: Internationalizing teacher education for a global arena. *Teaching Education*, *21*(1), 75-88.

Pence, H. M., & Macgillivray, I. K. (2008). The impact of an international field experience on preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*(1), 14-25.

Sahin, M. (2008). Cross-cultural experience in preservice teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*(7), 1777-1790.

Stoughton, E. H. (2007). "How will I get them to behave?": Preservice teachers reflect on classroom management. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *23*(7), 1024-1037.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Tang, S. Y. F., & Choi, P. L. (2004). The development of personal, intercultural and professional competence in international field experience in initial teacher education. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, *5*(1), 50-63.

Taylor, H. (1969). *The world as teacher*. New York: Doubleday.

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

Wilson, A. H. (1982). Cross-cultural experiential learning for teachers. *Theory into Practice*, *21*(3), 184-192.

Woodgate-Jones, A. (2008). Training confident primary modern foreign language teachers in England: An investigation into preservice teachers' perceptions of their subject knowledge. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*, 1-13.

Appendix 1 Post-programme Evaluation (Overseas Centre)

1. Parts of the course you got the most learning from: _____
2. The teaching and instruction that helped your learning the most throughout the course was _____
3. The key methods and strategies for teaching English that you will use in your classes in your own country are: _____
4. The teaching/learning materials and activities for lessons were useful (please tick):
   _____ Yes _____ No
5. Please write down the specific teaching resources and materials from the course that you will be able to adapt to use in your classes in your own country.
6. School visits – please comment on your experiences of visits to schools in New Zealand.

Appendix 2 Post-programme Evaluation (Home Institution)

1. Overall, to what extent were you satisfied with the immersion programme?
2. The Postgraduate English Language Immersion Programme (PELIP) aimed to further develop your English language proficiency. To what extent was this aim achieved?
3. PELIP aimed to broaden and deepen your awareness of the culture of the host country, in particular the English-speaking environment. To what extent was this aim achieved?
4. PELIP aimed to enhance your understanding of the teaching and learning of English and the education system of the host country. To what extent was this aim achieved?
5. To what extent did you find the following major components of the programme useful to help you achieve the programme aims?
   - Language work
   - Community-based activities
   - School visits and observations
   - Classroom teaching
6. To what extent was the in-school teaching experience facilitative to the enhancement of your English language proficiency?

Appendix 3 Post-immersion Interview

1. In what ways has the international field experience influenced you today?
2. What have you learnt about yourself as a result of your international field experience?
3. What did you learn from the centre tutors and in-school mentors for your own teaching?
4. What similarities/differences did you notice between New Zealand elementary students and Hong Kong primary pupils?
5. How do teachers in New Zealand differ from teachers in Hong Kong? In what ways are they the same?
6. What did you find about New Zealand schools?
7. What did you observe in New Zealand schools that you would not observe in Hong Kong?
8. What have you learned in the New Zealand classroom that affects your view of yourself as a teacher?
9. What have you learned in New Zealand that can be applied to your teaching in Hong Kong?
10. Has the international field experience changed your view on second language teaching and learning?
11. Are you more interested in English language teaching after the New Zealand trip? Why or why not?