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Chi Cheung R. Yang

The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong, rccyang@ied.edu.hk

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Pre-service English Teachers' Perceptions of an Overseas Field Experience Programme

Chi Cheung Ruby Yang
The Hong Kong Institute of Education
Hong Kong

Abstract: This paper aims to present a small group of pre-service English teachers' perceptions towards the overseas field experience programme jointly organised by a university in Canada and the teacher trainer institute in Hong Kong. The study involved seven Canadian Year 3 and 4 B.Ed. TESL students who participated in the investigated eight-week overseas field experience programme to Hong Kong. A purely qualitative method was adopted in which a semi-structured interview was conducted and the participants were asked to keep fieldwork logs to obtain their views of the programme. The results of the study show that the participants were highly positive about this overseas field experience because they could understand more about the nature of Chinese ESL students through their teaching experience in Hong Kong. The paper concludes by suggesting that an effective collaboration and communication among the partnership universities and the linking schools is particularly important because it can make the participants benefit most from the programme.

Introduction

Field experience or teaching internship is an “indispensable part” of a teacher education programme (Posner, 2005, p. 3) and overseas field experience is important for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, especially for pre-service teachers who do not have any or enough teaching experience. It usually involves the collaboration of placement schools and universities (Stachowski & Mahan, 1998) and provides future teachers with the “real world” of classrooms to improve their teaching skills (Willhite, McIntyre, & Willhite, 2008, p. 329). One important argument for including field experience in the teacher education programme is to provide student teachers with opportunities to integrate theory learnt into practice in a meaningful way (Wiseman, Knight, & Cooner, 2005). Ribich (1995) strongly believes that field experience in teacher education programmes helps students grow and develop as

teachers. It also assesses students' "readiness for entering the teaching profession" (Jaquith, 1995, p. 20). Regarding overseas field experience, Brindley et al. (2009, p. 532) suggest that a study abroad internship program can "act as a catalyst" for pre-service teachers' professional development.

Pre-service English teachers in the modern era need to have global or cross-cultural knowledge. In an age of globalization in the twenty-first century, there is a great demand for teachers to have increased knowledge about the world and a need for them to experience cross-cultural learning (Merryfield, 1995; Mahon & Cushner, 2002) and possess actual international knowledge (Merryfield, 1995). Overseas student teaching is "a way to expand cross-cultural knowledge" of student teachers (Cushner & Mahon, 2002, p. 56; Mahon & Cushner, 2002, p. 7). It is a crucial element which allows pre-service teachers to gain meaningful understanding of other cultures as well as their own (Cushner, 2007). Jaquith (1995) considers that student teachers need to have the experience of working in contexts which are culturally different from those they worked before. Causey, Thomas, and Armento (2000) also note that it is the most important goal to develop pre-service teachers with greater cultural sensitivity and knowledge. They should have knowledge about the similarities and differences of different cultures (Stachowski & Mahan, 1995). Therefore, it is recommended that cross-cultural field experience should be incorporated into teacher training programmes so as to equip student teachers with knowledge, skills, and techniques to teach students with diverse backgrounds (Stachowski & Mahan, 1998).

In reviewing the literature about overseas or international field experience, a number of its benefits can be found. For example, student teachers demonstrated "personal growth" (Willard-Holt, 2001, p. 516) and have become more confident to themselves and increased cultural sensitivity (Mahon & Cushner, 2002). Malewski and Phillion's (2009) study also showed how social class, gender and race influenced the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the students and members of the host community during their international field experience.

Previous studies of international field experience for pre-service teachers also showed its positive impact on cross-cultural perspective. Pence and Macgillivray (2008), for instance, found the benefits of increasing students' confidence as teachers and showing appreciation and respect for differences of others and other cultures in their examination of the international field experience. Willard-Holt (2001) also discovered that the pre-service teachers become more globally aware after a short-term international experience for a week in Mexico. However, Gay and Kirkland (2003, p. 186) think that it is not enough for pre-service teachers to appreciate cultural differences but to develop "cultural critical consciousness".

The present study aims to investigate a group of pre-service teachers' perceptions towards an eight-week overseas field experience programme to Hong Kong. Contrary to Cheng and So's (1999) study which was conducted to find out the pre-service teachers' learning experience in the field experience in their home country in Hong Kong, the participants of this study were a small group of pre-service ESL teachers from Canada who

had their overseas field experience in Hong Kong. To achieve the aim of this study, the following research questions were answered:

What are the pre-service English teachers' perceived benefits of this overseas field experience programme?

What is the pre-service English teachers' important learning in the field experience in Hong Kong? How is it different from that in their home country?

Are there any problems encountered by the pre-service English teachers in the field experience in Hong Kong?

The Overseas Field Experience Programme

In November 2008, a university in Quebec, Canada established partnerships with the teacher training institute in Hong Kong and a primary and a secondary school (both of them belong to the same sponsoring body) to arrange for seven Canadian B.Ed. TESL students to Hong Kong to have their field experience overseas. This overseas field experience lasted for eight weeks. Four participants were arranged to teach in the primary school whereas the other three taught in the secondary school. They shared accommodations in an apartment which is near their placement schools surrounded by local people. It was expected that they could experience the lifestyle of Hong Kong people and become more independent.

In the placement primary and secondary schools, there were about 730 and 1,100 students respectively. There was only one native-speaking English teacher in each school. The other teachers were all local Hong Kong Chinese teachers. For the students, all of them were ESL students, with the majority of them speak Cantonese as their mother tongue. The medium of instruction used in these two schools was Chinese (Cantonese), except in the English Language subject.

Each participant was assigned to a cooperating teacher (an English teacher from the placement school). In addition, two supervisors were involved. They were the assistant professors from the teacher training institute who had a number of years of teaching experience in Hong Kong and taught the methodology courses in the institute. One visited the primary school while the other was in-charge of the lesson observations in the secondary school. The supervisors visited each participant three times and assessed his/her teaching performance based on the criteria set by the University. To give feedback to the participants about their teaching performance, two forms (Student Teaching Summative Assessment form and Anecdotal Assessment form) had to be completed by the supervisor. There was also a coordinator from the teacher training institute who acted as the mediator between the cooperating teachers and the student teachers to make sure that the student teachers' experience in Hong Kong was as rich as it could be.

Methods

The Participants

In this study, seven participants (1 male and 6 female) were involved. All of them were B.Ed. TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) students in a university in Montreal, Canada. Among them, five of them were Year 3 students and two were studying in Year 4. While field experience (or student teaching) is compulsory for all students in the B.Ed. programme, the participation of this overseas field experience to Hong Kong was totally voluntary. However, completion of this overseas field experience would be considered as fulfilling the student teaching requirement of their B.Ed. programme because the pre-service teachers were assessed by using the same set of criteria as their 'home' field experience. All of them had some field experience in teaching ESL in their home country before taking part in this programme. One of them even had some experience teaching in China. For the other six participants, however, it was their first overseas field experience in teaching.

Instruments and Procedures

To conduct this study, the researcher started by first getting the approval from the University. In order to obtain the participants' views of the overseas field experience in Hong Kong, a qualitative research method was adopted in this study. At the beginning of the field experience programme, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary. Then, they were asked to keep fieldwork logs (one of the assessment components of the student teaching) to let them record sequences of events and reflect on their experience in the eight-week overseas field experience. To analyse the fieldwork logs easily, the participants were reminded to follow the same format which included the date, lists of significant events that happened every week and reflections of the significant events. Posner (2005) highlights the importance of having an opportunity for student teachers to reflect on their field experience. On the last day of the field experience, the researcher went to the primary and the secondary schools to conduct on-site semi-structured interviews with the participants (refer to Appendix for the interview questions). The interviews were in the format of a group interview through which the seven participants' feedback about the overseas field experience programme could be obtained at one time. The advantages of using a group interview are that much time could be saved and it is easy for the researcher to assess if there is a shared view among the participants (Patton, 1990). Nevertheless, since the participants were interviewed at the same, they might tend to give responses that were more socially acceptable or desirable because of social pressure. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The data were analysed by using qualitative content analysis (Flick, 2002). Through reading the interview transcripts and fieldwork logs kept by the participants repeatedly, certain themes which were relevant for

answering the research questions emerged. The data were then summarised in a systematic way (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989).

The Results

To answer the research questions listed at the beginning of this paper, the results obtained from both the semi-structured interviews and the fieldwork logs are presented in this section. With the use of a coding method, certain categories came out. For coding, it is defined by Gibbs (2007, p. 38) as “a way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it”.

Perceived Benefits of the Overseas Field Experience

From the semi-structured interviews and the fieldwork logs, it can be found that the participants, in general, were positive about the overseas field experience programme. Two participants expressed in the interview and the fieldwork logs that they had improvement in lesson planning, teaching and classroom management:

“That is something to be proud of, as I’ve improved my planning, methods and management, and I gain more experience. ...I’ve been very fortunate in this field placement, and have had very positive experiences overall.” (Participant 5)

“I think not having a common first language with my students pushes me further to develop strategies to help them learn English. I’ve learned to use visual aids, non-verbal cues and facial expressions to make them understand.” (Participant 7)

One participant mentioned in the interview that she knows more about the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching methods adopted in Hong Kong and Canada:

“I think it’s very valuable to teach in Hong Kong because I’ve gained more understanding of the pros and cons of the teaching methods favoured in Hong Kong and Quebec.” (Participant 1)

The participants showed improvement in their teaching because of the opportunities to observe their cooperating teachers’ lessons and the feedback given by their supervisors and cooperating teachers.

Observations of cooperating teachers’ lessons

All the participants stated that they benefited a lot from the lesson observations arranged by the placement schools because they could know more about how the teachers in Hong Kong

teach and manage the class, and the learning styles and levels of Hong Kong students. Some illustrative responses given by the participants are as below:

“The lesson observations are useful because the teaching style and the learning style of the students here are different from those in Quebec.” (Participant 4)

“It (Observing lessons) helped me to know my students’ level so that I could plan the lessons appropriately.” (Participant 6)

Feedback of the supervisors and cooperating teachers

All participants agreed that the feedback given by their supervisors in the post-observation discussions is useful, and three of them mentioned that they had gained a lot from their cooperating teachers in teaching. The responses obtained from the interviews and the fieldwork logs are as follows:

“My supervisor is great! She knows a lot of teaching theories and the suggestions given by her are practical.” (Participant 3)

“My supervisor has a lot of local teaching experience. I’ve learnt a lot from her.” (Participant 1)

“My cooperating teacher is inspiring....She has a lot of creative ideas and knows how to arouse the students’ learning interests.” (Participant 4)

“My CT (cooperating teacher) is really supportive and gives me good tips and advice.” (Participant 6)

“The school I taught gave us a lot of support in many different ways. My supporting teacher was especially helpful and willing to share (teaching) ideas with me, despite being very busy.” (Participant 5)

Involvement of schools’ extra-curricular activities

The participants also benefited from involving in the placement schools’ extra-curricular activities during their overseas field experience. All of the participants thought that getting involved in the extra-curricular activities organised by the placement schools was of great help to them. Two of them mentioned that it was a good way to make them become “part of the school community”. The other three participants suggested that it was easier for them to interact with the students and know more about the students’ interests.

Important Learning in the Field Experience in Hong Kong

Apart from those perceived benefits presented above, the participants have also learned something from the field experience to Hong Kong which made it different from the field experience in their home country.

Awareness of the differences between Hong Kong and Canada

In the semi-structured interviews and the fieldwork logs, all the participants agreed that an important learning in the field experience in Hong Kong is that they understand the differences between Hong Kong and Canada in terms of the education system, school culture, students' learning style, and teachers' teaching style. Some illustrated quotes are as follows:

“There is a lot more structure in Hong Kong and limited flexibility. In Canada, we have a curriculum but it's not so controlled. The education system in Hong Kong is also much more focused on discipline.” (Participant 7)

“I was so surprised that in my class of 42 students, 8 didn't hand-in their reading journal and 17 of them just copied....They (The students) don't want to respond if they have to speak in English.” (Participant 1)

“Although there has been a shift towards the communicative learning approach in Hong Kong, much of the classroom teaching is still frequently employing repetition and memorisation. Students also use rote memorisation to learn English.” (Participant 3)

Two participants also mentioned in their fieldwork logs about the teachers' different ways of handling class discipline:

“Discipline is a big issue for me. Some students didn't do their homework. I asked my CT how to deal with it. She said the students need to be scared of me. She also told me to make them stand up for the whole lesson as punishment. Wow! It's really different from home.” (Participant 1)

“I was shocked to see how much my CT teased her students, almost embarrassed them when they misbehave...it is no way that this kind of teasing would be acceptable in Canada.” (Participant 4)

Readiness to be a teacher

One other important learning gained from the field experience mentioned by a participant in her fieldwork logs is that she had become more prepared to be a teacher after the field experience in Hong Kong:

“In Canada, teachers are less involved than the Hong Kong teachers in extra-curricular activities after school. This makes me understand that teaching is not like a regular 9 to 5 job.

We have to be prepared to invest in creating a school community so that students are motivated to do the same.” (Participant 5)

Problems Encountered in the Field Experience

Though the participants benefited and learned a lot from the field experience to Hong Kong, it does not mean that there is no limitation in this overseas field experience programme.

Inadequate communication between partnership universities and placement schools

Four participants pointed out that the communication between the partnership universities and the placement schools was not adequate. The student teachers were not given enough teaching at the beginning, and the arrangement of the placement schools was poor sometimes. These can be illustrated in the feedback written in their fieldwork logs:

“In the first few weeks, we (the student teachers) were only allowed to observe different classes taught by our cooperating teachers and we were not doing enough teaching.”

(Participant 3)

“We don’t know what the CTs want us to do. A meeting was held between us and the CTs but this only happened a month after the field experience.” (Participant 7)

“...My lessons are postponed and there is always something goes wrongly. Half of the time, I feel like I’m always waiting and that’s frustrating.” (Participant 4)

“Today is somewhat overwhelming because of the whole Halloween party that is organised completely around our presence here in Hong Kong. All those Halloween activities are fun but we really don’t know what we are supposed to be doing in the party.” (Participant 1)

Inadequate support given by cooperating teachers

Probably because the cooperating teachers were not clear what kind of support they were supposed to give to the pre-service teachers because of inadequate communication between the partnership universities and the placement schools, two participants expressed negative feeling about their cooperating teachers in their fieldwork logs. One of them thought that the cooperating teachers did not give her adequate feedback about her teaching. An illustrative quote is that:

“The teaching experience is really challenging and not always fun. I feel like I have about no support in what to do.” (Participant 1)

The other participant mentioned that:

“The cooperating teachers here are less willing to hand over control of their classes to student teachers, though they are much more welcoming than the cooperating teachers in Canada.”
(Participant 2)

Encountered problems in teaching due to differences in culture and language

Three student teachers mentioned in their reflective journals about the problems of the differences in culture and teaching strategies adopted make them feel hard to adapt to the teaching in Hong Kong:

“I felt like the expectations were for me to adapt myself to the system and follow the methods in place rather than try to experiment with my own teaching style.” (Participant 7)

“...They (The students) were not as keen to participate as I anticipated. The cultural differences make teaching here challenging if I only base myself on the techniques I used in Canada.” (Participant 1)

“It’s really hard to find my own teaching style in this environment. I find myself lost in between what I know, what I am and what is expected from me here in Hong Kong.”
(Participant 2)

One participant also suggested it was the language barrier that she found it difficult to build up a relationship with the students.

Discussion and Implications for Teacher Education

The major purpose of this study is to investigate a group of pre-service ESL teachers’ perceptions of the overseas field experience programme to Hong Kong. The findings of the study show that the involved B.Ed. TESL students were, in general, positive about this overseas field experience because they had gained a lot in teaching, particularly in methods of teaching, and became more ready to be teachers. This aspect is similar to Pence and Macgillivray’s (2008) study in which the student teachers had professional changes as a result of the international field experience. The pre-service teachers also benefited from the lesson observations of their cooperating teachers. Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite (2005, p. 97) suggest that “cooperating teachers serve as models who guide prospective teachers in the application of theory and instructional approaches introduced in university methods courses”. Through observing the teaching of their cooperating teachers, who have local English teaching experience, the pre-service teachers could understand more about the learning styles and levels of the ESL students in Hong Kong. Apart from that, the supervisors’ feedback given in the post-observation discussions was useful to the pre-service teachers. Their

professional expertise, together with their substantial experience in teaching, benefits the novice teachers a lot and may help them apply the theories learnt into practice.

Overseas field experience is not the same as travelling as tourists. Merely go travelling to an overseas country does not necessarily enhance pre-service teachers' cultural awareness. It is through their real classroom teaching experience and involvement in extra-curricular activities in placement schools that the pre-service teachers can benefit from the overseas field experience and understand the learning style of the students in the overseas country they travel to. Cultural awareness is especially crucial for the pre-service teachers in the twenty-first century who may come across the students with diverse language backgrounds and learning styles and interests even in mainstream classrooms in their home country. Having the experience teaching in an overseas country can help improve pre-service teachers' confidence to cater for learner diversity. As suggested by Cartledge, Gardner, and Ford (2009), to become culturally competent teachers, they should possess cultural awareness and be able to adopt appropriate teaching techniques and strategies.

On the other hand, a few of the participants showed negative feeling about their cooperating teachers. One of them mentioned the inadequate support given by her cooperating teacher. In a field experience for novice teachers, not only the university supervisors' but also the cooperating teachers' support and advice are important. Vertuno (1995) points out that cooperating teachers should give suggestions for student teachers' improvement. Fant (1996) also found that field experience without feedback has a negative relationship with the teaching performance of student teachers.

Based on the findings of this study, a number of implications for teacher education can be drawn.

First, overseas field experience should be introduced as part of the teacher training programmes for pre-service ESL teachers. Student teachers not only can gain more teaching experience, but also learn something that is different from the teaching practice in their home country through the overseas field experience. Apart from having an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to teach students who do not share the same first language and culture as them, they can understand more about the education system, school culture, teaching methods and students' learning style in the foreign country they travel to. Through this overseas field experience, it is expected that teachers, as reflective practitioners, can learn the pros and cons of the education system in their home country and that in the foreign country and then reflect on their future practices in teaching.

To make the participants benefit most from the overseas field experience programme, an effective communication and collaboration among the partnership universities and the linking schools is essential. Before the field experience, the coordinator of the programme should hold a meeting with the cooperating teachers to let them clearly understand the purpose of the programme and the kind of support they can give to the student teachers. In the meeting, the university's coordinator should also let the placement schools and the cooperating teachers

know the needs of the student teachers (Millar, 1995). It is expected that more adequate support and feedback on the student teachers' teaching performance can be provided. Vertuno (1995) emphasises that all parties involved in the partnership must maintain contact. Student teachers can benefit most if adequate communication among different parties (Vertuno, 1995) and a closer collaborative relationship between universities and placement schools (Willhite, McIntyre, & Willhite, 2008) can be maintained.

Finally, as the pre-service teachers may not have any ideas about the teaching environment and the nature of students of the overseas country they are going to travel for their overseas field experience, a briefing session should be conducted at the beginning of the programme prior to travelling. Pence and Macgillivray (2008) emphasise the importance of helping the student teachers understand the differences in culture they would encounter in their overseas field experience. The pre-service teachers may find it easier to adapt to the teaching life in an overseas country if they have some knowledge about the education system, school culture, teachers' teaching methods and students' learning styles of that country.

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Appendix Semi-structured Interview Questions

Can you tell me your main reason for participating in this overseas field experience to Hong Kong?

What is your perception of the overseas field experience in Hong Kong?

Do you think the lesson observations arranged by your placement school are useful?

Why/Why not?

How about involving in the extra-curricular activities organised by your placement school?

Do you think it is meaningful? Why/Why not?

Can you share with me what you have learned in the field experience in Hong Kong? Are there any differences between the field experience in Hong Kong and that in Quebec, Canada?

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