Student Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching and Learning Conditions in Fiji and Maldives.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions of teaching and learning condition by a number of groups of primary student teachers in Fiji and the Maldives. In Fiji two groups were surveyed; second year Primary Certificate student teachers from Lautoka Teachers' College and second year Australian students from a Bachelor in Teaching program who had completed a three week overseas Fiji practicum. The student teachers in the Maldives were from the second year English and Dhivehi medium Primary Teaching Certificate program. The survey instrument was completed after three weeks of practice teaching experience.

Three open-ended questions asked students to: describe the environment of their classroom and any other learning spaces used during the prac; identify the 'things' in their learning environment that encouraged or facilitated the children's learning; and thirdly to describe the 'things' in the learning environment that discouraged or frustrated the children's learning. The data were analyzed thematically and the results are presented as general themes and by country. Several strategies are suggested to address the crowded and cramped classrooms, negative teacher behaviour to slower students and the importance of providing visual stimulus and encouragement for children's work which were some of the issues which emerged from the students responses.

Introduction

From the students perspective, the practicum experience is the most valued component of their preparation to be teachers [Murray, 1994]. Strategies to ensure the coherence and linkage of this experience to the overall preservice program continues to be a significant research focus. While expectations are usually developed about 'what' and 'how' to teach prior to the practicum, some dimensions of the context of teaching and learning often comes as a shock to students in their first extended practicum.

This research explores student perceptions of the teaching and learning context. A knowledge of these perceptions should enable teacher educators to be sensitive to the 'realities' as faced by students in the schools. A clear focus on the actual issues students will have to address in subjects and briefings prior to the field experience would be considered by students to be a realistic and valuable preparation for their practicum placements.

Cross cultural data are presented in this paper. Specifically the paper reports the perceptions of teaching and learning condition by four groups of primary student teachers in
Fiji and the Maldives. In Fiji two groups were surveyed; second year Primary Certificate student teachers from Lautoka Teachers' College [LTC] and second year Australian students from a Bachelor in Teaching program who had completed a three week overseas Fiji practicum. The student teachers in the Maldives were in the Institute of Education's [IoE] second year Certificate in Primary Education students. One group were the English Medium [EM] students who completed their practicum in urban [Male'] schools and the second group were Dhivehi Medium [DM] students who taught in atoll schools.

The overseas teaching practice program conducted in schools in the Lautoka area of Fiji by the Faculty of Education from the University of Wollongong [UoW] has been operating since 1982. The Divisional Office, school personnel and the Wollongong staff have an ongoing professional relationship based on trust and mutual benefits from the program which have been documented for the 'hosts' and 'guests' by Booth [1997]. The principal researcher has a longstanding professional relationship with LTC and schools in Fiji. He has also undertaken a number of consultancy projects in Maldives. This paper is part of an ongoing collaborative and cross cultural research initiative with staff from LTC, IoE and UoW.

**Literature Review**

Prospective teachers enter pre-service teacher education with a wide range of different experiences, opinions, beliefs and conceptions of teaching and learning. A number of studies [Richards and Killen (1994), Murray (1991) and McDermott (1991)] report a low credibility by students to the academic component of their program. The practicum is where real learning happens. Given this student perspective, the preparation for the practicum (Fennell, 1993) and the experience itself (Mason, 1997 and Killen, 1994) becomes very important to develop confidence and a positive attitude toward their professional development.

A number of studies have explored student teachers perceptions of the quality of school climate (Williams, 1989), quality of school life (Divins, 1991) and effective teaching (Wilson and Cameron, 1994) as contributors to the success of their school experience. Williams (1989) suggests that students' grade point average is positively correlated to having a more positive perceptions of school climate.

Richards and Killen's (1994) study explored ways of reducing problems during the practicum. The set tasks developed in the program were precise and considered helpful by the students in getting a sense of the complexity of teaching and the breadth of teacher responsibilities. However, the academic staff and the teachers did not always share a common expectation for the student teacher. Kelly (1993) reports that many of the conceptions of teaching developed during the practicum are based on the school's practices and procedures rather than models of teaching promoted in university or college classes. The skepticism about academic teacher educator's knowledge of the 'real world' is alive and well in the pre-service student culture!

Work by Calder (1994) at Waikato suggests that the practicum can be made more effective by strategies that include clarifying relationships between theory and practice, improving the communication among schools, colleges and students and the development of clear expectations for the students.

This study attempts to extend this research by identifying what students themselves consider to be influences on the learning context in schools and what encourages and discourages learning. A more explicit identification of the various perceptions about life and learning in schools will assist in the formulating and negotiation of reasonable expectations of students in the practicum.
Design

1. Participants

• Fiji

Forty eight second year Certificate in Primary Teaching [two year program] from Lautoka Teachers' College were surveyed immediately after their final three week teaching practice. The local Fiji sample were representative of the wider cohort in that there was even balance of males and females and Fijian and Indo Fijian students from two Education tutorial groups.

Twenty five second and third year Bachelor of Teaching [Primary] students were surveyed in the last few days of their three week Fiji practicum program. The group were predominantly female as was the cohort from which they came and for most this was their first overseas and cross cultural experience.

• Maldives

The Institute of Education in Male' has a two year Primary Teaching Certificate which prepares primary teachers for working in either the English Medium in the capital, Male' or Dhevihi Medium [DM] for teachers to work in atoll schools. Twenty eight second year English Medium Primary Teaching Certificate students were surveyed a week after their return from their final three week practicum. Most of this cohort of students will be placed in the English medium Male’ schools.

The thirty two DM program students completed their final practicum in atoll schools before completing the survey. The atoll are often more poorly resourced than the Male’ primary schools. Both sample groups of students were representative of the gender and age mix of their cohort.

2. Survey

The three questions asked each student to:

• describe the environment of your classroom and any other learning spaces used during the first two weeks of the prac;

• describe [in point form] the 'things' in the learning environment that encourage or facilitate the children's learning;

• describe [in point form] the 'things' in the learning environment that discourage or frustrate the children's learning.

The one page [A4] survey sheet was distributed and usually completed by the students in class time. The responses were anonymous and no biographical details were requested. Most students completed at least two points for each question in the quarter page of blank space available for there responses. While the instruction indicated that the reverse of the page could be used for additional comment, only two students wrote extended answers.

3. Analysis

Each researcher undertook a thematic analysis of the responses by focus question. Key themes were identified and ranked by the frequency of mention in the students’ responses.
Representative statements from the data are used to give a strong student voice to the findings and the discussion. The analysis will initially be by major the themes identified across all groups. A discussion of the country based data will follow this discussion.

Results

1. Characteristics of the Classroom Environment

Each student was asked in a quarter A4 page space to "... describe the environment of your classroom and any other learning spaces used during practice teaching". The data is summarised by characteristic and response group in Table 1. The characteristic themes are presented by overall rank across the individual data sets.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical space</td>
<td>[1] • Crowded and cramped classes was an overwhelming first response. Unable to carry our role plays and group work. • No undercover spaces and limited and poor quality of outdoor spaces for PE - often weather limitations - too hot or raining! • Chalk dust 'covers the front three rows'. • Hot afternoon sun on the children.</td>
<td>[1] • Unanimous focus on the problems of the classrooms. many with a single hall with blackboard partitions. • Unavoidable noise - especially in Quran recitations. • Most successful lessons were taken in the compound where there was lots of space and room for participation.</td>
<td>[1] • Over crowding and congestion was the most frequently mentioned. Poor seating and spaces for the students. • Outside environments were spacious and effective for PE and other activities. • Smaller number of students reported spacious classroom spaces. • Composite classes in small rooms were</td>
<td>[1] Limitations of space (compared to Aust) was the most frequent description of the class. No space for floor work. Contrast there was 'plenty of grounds' for PE and outdoor activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class size</td>
<td>[2] 30 to 40 was common</td>
<td>[2] Large class size 35-38 did not allow individual attention - especially for the weaker students.</td>
<td>[3] Class size varied between 23 and 47 students in an urban area.</td>
<td>[2] Class size of over 40 was not uncommon. Not enough desks in some classes</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>[6] Poor range of materials in some classes.</td>
<td>[5] Resources varied from 'plenty of materials' to 'there was 'little in the store room'.</td>
<td>[2] Many students reported effective display areas or childrens' work.</td>
<td>[4] Old texts and aids. Several places did not have a borrowing system in the limited library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room characteristics</td>
<td>[3] Clean and tidy but a passive formality and ineffectiveness of the wall display spaces.</td>
<td>[3] Distractions for other students/classes and members of the community who come to watch.</td>
<td>[4] While the classes were clean, the chalk board dominated.</td>
<td>[3] Bare and lacking visual stimulation. Louvers made it hard on the side walls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers role</td>
<td>[4] Teachers were not encouraging. The children were not asking them to talk in English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[5] Teacher centred 'chalk and talk' with a strong focus on exams at every level.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Physical space

All groups ranked 'crowded and congested' classrooms as their most frequent perception of the teaching and learning environment they experienced on prac. While outside spaces were seen as successful places for learning in Fiji and the atolls, this was clearly not the case in the matchbox sized school compounds in Male'. In part this perception of overcrowding is linked to the numbers in class which was ranked as the second major characteristic of classroom environments. Noise interference in the high rise concrete schools in Male' and the semi-partitioned atoll schools were a frequent perception in the Maldivian students' responses.

Class Size

Having over 40 children in a class was not uncommon for many students. In this second most mentioned characteristic of the learning environment, some students reported that "it was not possible for the teacher to move between the rows". Having many children in a composite class in a small room was reported by Fiji students as being "... hard to manage". "How can you give the weaker ones [and in some cases the better ones] assistance?" was one example of a frequent plea. In a small number of classrooms there were reports of inadequate tables and insufficient number of chairs for all the students.

Room Characteristics

Clean but sterile classrooms dominated by the blackboard was the third ranked theme. There was a reoccurring theme that the limited wall spaces were not attractive or effectively used in many cases. While side wall louvres often limited display space in Fiji, the lack of side walls in many of the atoll schools enabled the community to 'come and watch'.

Resources

The considerable age and limited range of resources available was a limiting characteristic in most cases. There was some students who reported the display of student work as a very positive characteristic of their classroom.

Teachers Role

The teacher centred 'chalk and talk' approach with a focus on the average child in the class was a common theme. Some students reported very encouraging teachers but others felt that their teachers used too much negative reinforcement and ridicule of weaker learners.

2. Factors that Facilitate Children's Learning

The students were next asked [in a quarter page] to describe [in point form] the "... 'things' in the learning environment that encourage or facilitate the children's learning". The factors that encourage learning are summarised by rank for each group in Table 2.
## 2. Factors that Encourage Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maldive EM</th>
<th>Maldive DM</th>
<th>Fiji Local St.</th>
<th>Fiji Aust St.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male’</td>
<td>Atolls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Motivational strategies such as star charts, displays and teaching aids</td>
<td>1. Motivational strategies such as star charts and positive reinforcement</td>
<td>1. Environmental print - posters, maps, words of encouragement and Maths formula.</td>
<td>1. Environmental print - posters, maps, words of encouragement and maths formula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers' encouragement through friendly reinforcing behaviour, being equal and having interesting lessons.</td>
<td>2. Classroom interaction using pair and group work strategies.</td>
<td>2. Teachers' encouragement and positive actions toward the children.</td>
<td>2. Teacher's rapport and encouragement of the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Classroom interaction through the use of group work and other cooperative practices</td>
<td>3. Children as part of class organisation - monitors</td>
<td>3. Display of childrens work samples and 'creations'.</td>
<td>3. Display of childrens work samples,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Learning resources from the library and story telling</td>
<td>4. Teachers' encouragement by being a friend, giving individual attention and treating them as equals</td>
<td>4. Organisation of the classroom</td>
<td>4. Learning resources in form of texts, mathematics &amp; improvised basic science materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Clear ventilated class rooms</td>
<td>5. Children's eagerness to learn</td>
<td>6. Other facilities in the school -</td>
<td>6. Specific learning activities - class gardening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Visual Displays as a Facilitator

All groups ranked the importance of charts, posters and displays as motivating for the children. Despite the rather poor view of wall displays in section one, the power of visual reinforcement was perceived as very important for students in both Fiji and Maldives.

• Teacher Rapport and Encouragement

The second most frequently mentioned facilitator of learning was the rapport and encouragement provided by teachers. As one Fiji student explained:

"the teacher constantly uses explanation and demonstration which I believe encourages and facilitates childrens' learning." 'There's a positive attitude toward learning and I have a great teacher who is interested in the classes' progress and performance." Another noted that the "... children are constantly reminded of the "importance of a good education for their future" and especially to "do well in the exams". A third reported "My teacher [compared to some others in the school] has very good rapport... he treats them as 'his own' and has fun at times."

• Classroom Interaction and Recognition

The use of group work, co-operative activities and involving the children as part of class organisation were specifically identified by the Maldivian students. In the Fiji context the students reported that having their work recognised by the teachers and the other members of he class was very important for stimulating learning.

• Resources, Individual Attention and Class Organisation

The fourth ranked factor varied across the groups [see Table 2]. Learning resources were identified by the EM and the Australian students in Fiji, while the giving of individual attention and class organisation were ranked fourth by the other two student groups.

3. Factors that Discourage Children's Learning

The students were asked [in a quarter page] to describe [in point form] the "... 'things' in the learning environment that discourage or frustrate the children's learning". The factors that discourage learning are summarised by rank for each group in Table 3. There was little less unanimity in the ranking of these factors between the four groups of students.
3. Factors that Discourage Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maldive EM</th>
<th>Maldive DM</th>
<th>Fiji Local St.</th>
<th>Fiji Aust St.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male’</strong></td>
<td><strong>Atolls</strong></td>
<td><strong>Crowded and</strong></td>
<td><strong>Poor or</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[1] Negative teacher behaviour and strategies that focused primarily on the slower or disruptive learners.</td>
<td>[1] Physical conditions of the classrooms - too much noise, cramped conditions, poor acoustics and no/limited display space. [No electricity in many schools]</td>
<td>[1] Noisy classrooms.</td>
<td>[1] Inadequate resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[6]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cramped and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
uncomfortable seating with limited space for the display of creative work.

• Crowded and Noisy Classrooms

The physical condition of classrooms was perceived as the major frustration to childrens’ learning for the DM and local Fiji students. The factor was ranked second by the EM group where half of the responses referred to physical classroom conditions as frustrations to learning. The factors included; cramped classrooms, no storage or display space, external noise, smell from garbage too close to the building, unsuitable furniture and no protection from sunlight. No electricity in many atoll schools was also a feature mentioned by the DM group.

• Negative Teacher Behaviour

Negative teaching strategies focused primarily on the teachers’ attitude towards slower or more disruptive learners. Respondents believed such children were labelled as below average and teachers were seen to be ignoring their questions and answers, not catering for their needs and lowering their expectation of success. Teaching practices that drew the most criticism included inconsistent teacher expectation, shouting, unfriendliness, over valuing above average students, negative reinforcement (placing black stars on the star chart), and providing unjust punishments and rewards. Behaviours which dampened enthusiasm included lack of encouragement or appreciation of achievement and depriving children of participation in PE as a punishment. Bullying and humiliation by teachers in both countries were mentioned by all groups of students.

• Ineffective Teaching Strategies

Chalk and talk was cited as being both boring and not allowing the children to make decisions. There was "... too much teacher talk, repetition, lecturing, note taking, board work, book work and the lack of activities and extension opportunities." Giving no individual attention was cited as the teaching strategy causing the most discouragement to some learners.

• Resources

Lack of equipment and poor resources were cited as the top ranked discourager by the Australian students, second by the Fiji students and perceived by the DM students as a real problem as many atoll children could often not afford the basics for school such as pens and
books. Poor or non-existent library facilities and aged texts were identified by students across all contexts.

**Interruptions to Learning**

This category of discouragement came in the atolls from noise from adjacent classes, particularly during Quorn recitation, 'community watching' and other disruptive students in the school. In Male' there was a feeling that many school wide activities made learning difficult for the children.

**Curricula Issues**

Both groups of students in Fiji identified either the overloaded content based curricula with a strong exam emphasis and the timetable not being followed with PE and Art often being missed.

### 4. Country Themes

An overview of the data from both countries indicates that the factors that discourage or frustrate learning are perceived by the student teachers to be more pervasive than the factors that encourage or facilitate children's learning. While there were positive accounts of favourable learning conditions by students the overall perceptions reflected that the students found conditions made it fairly difficult to facilitate effective learning during their practicum experience.

**Maldives**

The physical constraints of classrooms and school facilities loomed large in almost all the student responses. Atoll schools were reported to have less effective classroom structures to shield noise and visual distractions, however they had the advantage of compound space which was not the case in the urban schools of Male'. Overcrowding was often mentioned with discouraging comments about the physical structure of the school.

Negative teacher attitudes and a lack of encouragement for learners were more frequently mentioned in Male' primary schools [EM] than in the atolls [DM]. However both groups of students [EM and DM] often cited motivational strategies and teacher encouragement as the first ranked factors that enhance learning.

The third feature of the Maldives data was the concern about the available resources for children in atoll schools. This issue did not feature as predominantly in the responses of the EM students in Male'.

**Fiji**

Overcrowded and congested classrooms was the strongest perception of the learning environment of both the local and the Australian student teachers in primary schools. With class size in the urban schools usually closer to 40 than the 30 pupils previously experienced by the Australian students, it was not unexpected that they could not do traditional 'floor work' with the children. On the other hand the available space in school compounds for PE and outdoor activities was frequently cited as being a positive feature by both groups of students.
Teachers' negative attitude to pupils through humiliation was as frequently mentioned as reports of encouragement and positive behaviour by the teachers towards the children. The level of resourcing was understandably the top constraint observed by the Australian but also the second most frequently identified constraint by the local students.

Discussion

A number of common themes have emerged from the two country study of student perceptions of the learning environment.

First are the constraints caused by large classes and overcrowding in class spaces which were designed for far fewer students. In the atoll settings the DM students report open plan teaching areas where noise from other classes and visual intrusion distract the learners. The limited compound areas in Male' schools were reported by the EM students to limit PE activities. In contrast to Australian schools where union pressure has successfully limited primary class sizes to 30 learners, this is not the case in the committee managed schools in Fiji nor from the sheer pressure for primary places in the Maldives. The interaction of class crowding with low level of material resources contributes to the 'boring chalk and talk' strategies which were particularly identified by the Australian and local students in Fiji.

There was extensive comment by all student groups on the discouraging impact of negative teacher behaviour, particularly toward slower and less able learners. At the same time the importance of motivational strategies, positive reinforcement and a teacher's personal encouragement and support was given the first [Maldives] or second [Fiji] ranking as factors that encourage learning. This dimension of many current teachers behaviour was clearly seen as being problematic for the students surveyed in the study. Strategies to assist young beginning teachers to address and modify this dimension of school culture would appear to be critical.

Recent research on the cause of 'dropping out' from secondary schools in Tonga by Tatafu [1997] in Tonga has identified the harsh treatment [corporal punishment, humiliation and negative reinforcement] metted out to weaker or less able students. In the Tongan context the neglect by teachers of the 'kau 'atamai kovi' (ones with 'bad brains') was not greatly different from the perspectives shared by many of the students from both countries in this study.

The importance of environmental print and the recognition of learners creativity in the display of their work was a powerful emergent perception from all groups of students. The Maldivian students described these motivational strategies as part of their classroom management strategies while the Fiji based student groups identified the display of student work and teaching charts that reinforced major ideas and concepts.

It was interesting to note that the perceptions of the students undertaking an overseas practicum identified similar characteristics and factors which encouraged or discouraged learning as the local students. The Australian students initial impression was that the schools and teachers were very different from those at home. More exposure brought the realisation that the problems are similar, perhaps more obvious in another country where they are thrown into sharp relief in the different cultural context. Previous research [Booth, 1994] suggested that this experience helps students to see problems more clearly and from a wider perspective.

From a teacher educators perspective the data establishes a perceptual framework held by students of their prospective work environment. While the dimensions identified by the students are understood by teacher educators in each country, these data identify those
characteristics, constraints and opportunities which can be strengthened or addressed in the pre-service program or before overseas students undertake an overseas practicum.

The findings suggests a number of suggestions or recommendations that could be addressed in units or briefings prior to a practicum.

• Awareness raising through case studies and selected school visits about the physical constraints and how they could be accommodated in lesson planning and teaching.

• Ongoing development of low cost and improvised teaching aids in the curriculum studies units. Exposure to practical ideas for the display of student work and learning materials in louvred and open sided classrooms.

• Enhancement of the emphasis on positive reinforcement and the development of strategies to handle a range of learner capacities in large and multi grade classes.

• Simulations activities to develop options and strategies to change collegial attitudes and behaviours that humiliate students.

• Development of confidence and skills in using limited group work in overcrowded classes and strategies to utilize the school compound in ways acceptable to head teachers.

• Developing class management strategies that encourage pupil participation in class routines and organisation.

Summary

This collaborative study has contributed to an understanding of student perceptions of the teaching and learning contexts in Fiji and Maldives. The physical conditions of many classrooms, overcrowding and the impact of outside noise was the most significant constraint to learning. This data will hopefully enable teacher educators staff to build student strengths and facilitate the development of their strategies to anticipate ways of dealing with frustrations in the learning environment. A number of strategies have been suggested to enhance students confidence and skill in the ‘realities’ of the classrooms and schools where they will teach.
References


