

# **An Investigation into the Personal and Professional Experiences of Pre-service Teachers on a Fiji Practicum**

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## **Introduction: Purpose of the Inquiry**

As a result of a perceived need embedded in the literature base concerning overseas teaching practicums in Australia, and because of a personal need as practicum directors in regard to developing a more definitive understanding of the possibilities of experience our undergraduate students developed while on practicum, this project sought to investigate on the nature of the overall impact of participating in a practicum in Fiji. In specific terms we sought to focus how these twenty four pre-service teachers' professional and personal understandings were either further developed or impaired by this experience, given the misgivings of several researchers either in regard to the efficacy of such a program or their belief that these professional experiences are not fully understood (George, Worrell, & Rampersad, 2002; Holt-Willard, 2001; McKay & Montgomery, 1995; Thomas & Hill, 1994

In order to explore this experience and to fulfill the purpose of the study, the following sub questions provide direction:

- What were the elements of personal and professional challenge involved in this experience?
- What were the coping mechanisms that pre-service teachers employed when immersed in a different culture and teaching experience?

## **Context of Situation: A potted history of this practicum and the current arrangements**

At the University of Wollongong, teacher-training courses are offered in the form of a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary or Physical Education) degree or through the Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary or Secondary) program. In the course of their degrees, pre-service teachers are required to participate in three annual teaching practicums. Predominantly, these are undertaken domestically but they are also offered overseas in Fiji, China, and Thailand.

The Fiji practicum, which is the focus of this study, has been in existence for over twenty years in partnership with the Fijian Education Department (Western). Originally, the practicum was located in Sigatoka, but during the 1980's was shifted to Lautoka. In the early years of the practicum, pre-service teachers were initially accommodated in the homes of their Fijians hosts. After careful deliberation, this was considered to be less than successful in terms of providing all pre-service teachers with ongoing support through access to staff and peers. The Fiji practicum was then moved to hotel accommodation that saw pre-service teachers in share type living, often with combinations of two, four or six pre-service teachers to a room. In 2000, this type of accommodation was again changed to ensure pre-service teachers had access to air-conditioning, considering to combat the extreme heat of Fiji, with only two pre-service teachers' per room.

Beginning with a series of meetings designed to provide students with as much detail about the practicum as possible, and allow students to ask questions, the actual duration of this teaching practicum is comprised of a two-week intensive period of in school teaching during June with an optional third week of travel.

When in Fiji, cultural and social activities are organised by the coordinators, however the aim is for the pre-service teachers to take on initiative, independence, and responsibility. Consequently, how much of the out-of-school time is spent is at the discretion of the pre-service teachers.

## **Context of the Research Situation**

While there appears to be a growing body of literature in this area it would appear that it is also characterized by certain degree of ambivalence in many aspects. While there is a measure of discussion surrounding the supposed limited research base (George, Worrell, & Rampersad, 2002; Holt-Willard, 2001; McKay & Montgomery, 1995; Thomas & Hill, 1994), methodological issues (Holt-Willard, 2001) and the immediacy of the professional outcomes (Faulconer, 2003), the key area of debate focuses on the efficacy of overseas practicums.

In regard to the concept of a teaching practicum as a whole, researchers in this field believe that there is no substitute for actual teaching experience. However, the specifics of the debate surrounding the value of the overseas pre-service experience focuses on the

notions of lasting quality, transferability of new found skills to other situations and the muddy waters of professionalism being more than the development of a skills base.

In an area that would appear to have not fully dealt with the holistic impact of an overseas pre-service experience, and one that tends to employ the tools of survey and questionnaires, there is nonetheless a growing assertion in the field that immersion in a teaching situation in another culture has a more positive global effect (Myers, 1996), creating a greater interest in and knowledge of other cultures (Hill & Thomas, 1998; McKay & Montgomery, 1995; Ellington & Rice, 1992). Hill and Thomas' (1998) survey focusing on perceived outcomes (in a very general sense) in respect to practicums undertaken in the Asian region, generated only positive results with not one negative comment mentioned. In regard to the students change in international and cross-cultural understanding sixty-four per cent also claimed to have improved their relations with Asian communities (Hill & Thomas, 1998).

However, a key area of contention is that while students generally report that their teaching ability increases, there is data suggesting that the interface with another cultural experience is not always a positive one (Holt-Willard 2001). While not clearly delineated, in some cases the overseas practicum is perceived to do more harm than good (Shantz & Ward 2000). Wiggins and Follo (1999: cited in Proctor, Rentz, & Jackson, 2001) found that:

... such experiences increased their students' ability to teach in diverse settings, but not their desire or commitment to teaching in these settings. In fact they found some evidence that the multicultural experience decreased preservice teachers' inclination to teach in culturally diverse schools. (Wiggins and Follo, 1999: cited in Proctor et al., 2001, p.220)

This view is also taken up by Burant and Kirby (2002). They found there was a possibility that the experience could provide a platform for pre-conceived stereotypes to become permanent beliefs for pre-service teachers. However, this was a result of poor planning in that the pre-service teachers were poorly informed about the culture before their immersion in it. They were uncertain or unaware of the challenges that they were to be faced with or strategies to deal with any ensuing problems. Consequently, they are unable to deal effectively with this new cultural experience becoming very insular.

Nevertheless, while accepting the possibility for a degree of cultural rejection, Thurston, Turner-Gottschang and Reed (1994) claim that the negative factors pertaining to an overseas experience are outweighed by the positives (Thurston, Turner-Gottschang, & Reed, 1994). In summary, the perceived benefits would appear to be:

- pre-service teachers perception that they developed other personal facets related to the quality of their approach in dealing with children such as empathy, tolerance, flexibility, patience, and self-confidence (Holt-Willard, 2001).
- an expression of positive attitudes (Proctor et al., 2001)
- an increase in general motivation to succeed (Hill & Thomas, 1998)
- a greater interest in the country visited (Hill & Thomas, 1998).

- a more global interest (McKay and Montgomery 1995; Dillard, 2002)
- the development of cultural sensitivity (Ndiwane, 2001)

While it may be the case that the positive benefits relating to the formation of a more positive cultural and global perspective for pre-service teachers participating in an overseas practicum, the question remains as to what are the specific professional benefits and what factors contribute to this?

## **Methodological Approach**

Embracing the ideal of ‘emergent design’ (Creswell, 2002), to answer this question a constructivist ‘bricolage’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) consisting of participant observation, case study, action research and micro-ethnography was deemed to be the most appropriate.

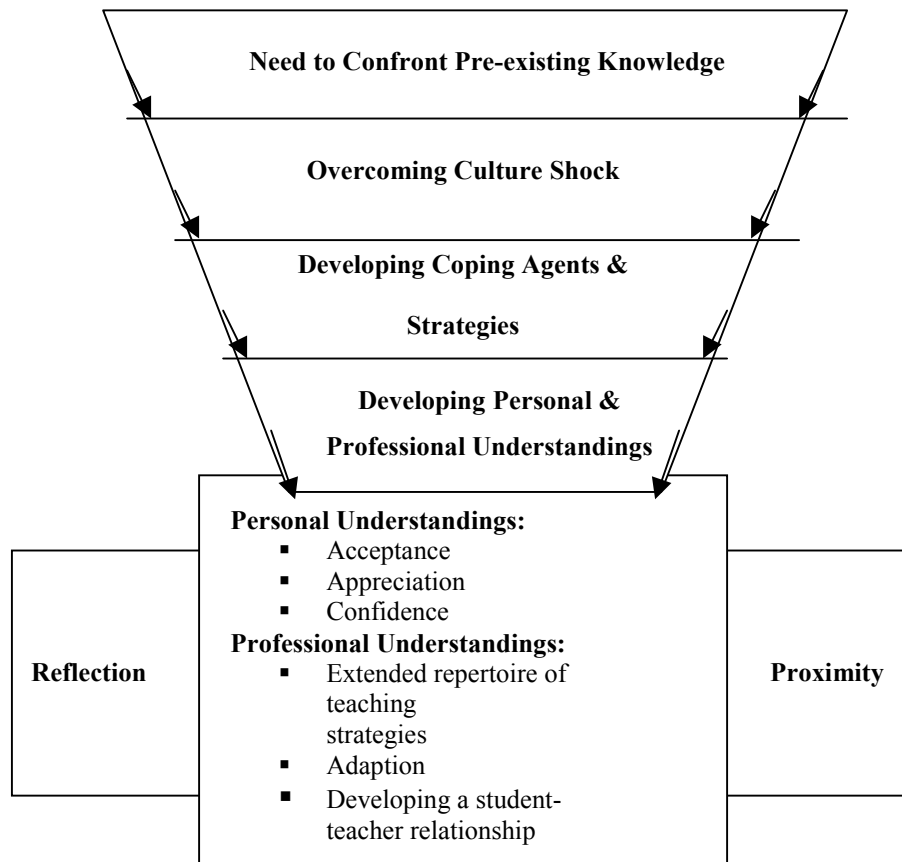
Using the twenty-four pre-service teachers (eighteen females and six males ) attending the 2004 Fiji practicum as a convenience sample, a undergraduate honours student took on the mantle of ‘insider’ as well as researcher. While the entire cohort contributed to this qualitative investigation, six pre-service teachers became ‘focus participants’ in that they agreed to contribute by way of more concentrated set of semi-structured interviews, in-class observations, informal conversations, use of their reflective journals and reflections concerning participant observation periods.

Using in-situ “inductive data analysis” (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002, pp.425-6; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.202), and post-practicum follow up the constant interplay between data collection and analysis resulted in the emergence of negotiated themes of professional and personal understandings.

## Findings

The following schematic diagram details the findings of this project and will act as a guide for the ensuing discussion. It should be noted that the ‘emic’ perspectives of the participant observer has been inserted to not only act as foil to the other students, but to also give further insight.

**Table 1: Personal and Professional Impacts**





### **- Need to Confront Pre-existing Understanding**

The observational and interview data showed the participants? were not excited and nervous during the initial meeting and initial days in Fiji, but that past experiences appeared to impact upon their expectations of the practicum. Those who had travelled overseas a number of times conveyed a greater confidence in the upcoming practicum while those with little to no travel experience expressed apprehensions in what they would encounter in Fiji.

For example, ‘Clare’ is an Australian citizen who had never travelled overseas when she opted to undertake the Fiji practicum. For this reason, she was excited about the opportunity to teach overseas but nervous about what living and teaching in a new country would entail. ‘Angela’ on the other hand, who is also an Australian citizen, had travelled overseas extensively prior to departing for Fiji. While she expressed some anxiety, she was aware that the unexpected could arise, believing it would be an enjoyable learning experience. This explained/accounted for?? illuminated ‘Angela’s’ viewpoint of the meetings held prior to the Fiji practicum, not understanding their value until she arrived in Fiji:

‘Ken’, who is a Canadian, was then at the other end of the continuum, the thought of departing for Fiji and teaching in a foreign country caused him no apprehensions. Influencing his enthusiastic view were the number of travels he had made overseas, taking him to Japan, China, Taiwan, where he taught for a year, and Australia where he is

currently studying at the University of Wollongong. These experiences were also cause for his impression of the meetings held prior to the Fiji practicum:

“Understandable the number of meetings we were having at the beginning to get everyone prepared, especially for the people who haven’t had experiences in other countries and don’t know what to expect or anticipate, so going through the motions was almost educational for me on how to educate people for this type of experience, but for myself I didn’t really feel as if it had too much of an impact cause like I’ve said I’ve been traveling extensively to a number of different countries so I felt I had a good grasp on what had to be done, what had to be prepared and what I needed to do mentally to get myself ready for this prac.”

(‘Ken’, Interview, 9/6/04)

Common in ‘Ken’ and ‘Angela’s’ beliefs about the meetings was that the information about Fiji was embellished. However, pre-service teachers held conflicting views about whether this proved to have a valuable impact upon their Fiji practicum experiences. While ‘Ken’ and ‘Angela’ could see the reasoning behind the meetings once they had arrived in Fiji, ‘Erin’ and ‘Samuel’, for example, still saw no value in the overcautious nature of the information shared.

‘Harry’ provided further substance to his argument that the meetings were unproductive by suggesting how they could be improved. From his perspective, meetings needed to be more relevant to the Fiji practicum experience, believing that in future photographs of the schools need to be shared, a more complete and thorough preparation checklist needs to

be prepared, and the practicum booklet needs to discuss the Fiji practicum more specifically rather than Fiji in general.

However, regardless of their beliefs of the meetings, pre-service teachers departed for Fiji where they were faced with beliefs and practices different to those accustomed to, a new culture (Mertens, 1998, p.165). This hinted at a new phase in the Fiji practicum experience, termed “culture shock” (Bishop’s University, 2001, p.1), which was experienced by all pre-service teachers, only at different extremes.

### **- Overcoming Culture Shock**

- ***Emic Understanding***

*On Friday 28<sup>th</sup> May 2004, the cohort of twenty-four pre-service teachers, along with the two coordinating lecturers and myself, arrived at Nadi airport, Fiji. Upon leaving the plane we were met with extreme heat even though the sun had set. We then made our way through customs and to the bus that was to take us to our hotel in Lautoka, Fiji. This bus ride was our introduction to Fijian culture. There were no windows on the bus but it survived its journey along the bumpy road that we were informed was their highway. On this journey we were greeted by Fijians, this same friendliness continued on arrival at the hotel where the staff welcomed us with music and offering kava, a customary drink in Fijian culture. We were then escorted to our rooms where we would take residence for two weeks.*

*Within the events of the day, I came to develop a friendship with a few pre-service teachers, sharing in the experience we were undertaking. Fortunately, the living arrangement meant our rooms were adjacent from each other which meant that when morning came, we were eager to wake one another and explore our new surroundings. This same enthusiasm continued over the first few days, impacted upon by the extension of unorganised time available to us since Monday was a public holiday.*

*Though soon enough, Tuesday June 1<sup>st</sup> came. Since this was the pre-service teachers' first day at their assigned school, I was then to embark on a day that would have me introduce myself to the schools of the focus participants. This implied getting myself from school to school, making the research I was conducting and myself known to relevant staff, and sharing in a few moments of conversation with the focus participants. While I was nervous about what these tasks entailed, I was excited, having greatly anticipated this day to come.*

*Overall, the day was successful but resulted in complete exhaustion. I had walked from school to school in the extreme heat, uncertain of the reliability of the public transport. I had put much effort into presenting myself as a confident person when in actual fact I was completely nervous. And, I had participated in the social atmosphere pre-service teachers had conjured the night before, causing me to forgo time that, in hindsight, I should have spent resting. Upon reflection on this day, I also came to realise the closure brought to my anticipation, I had now been introduced to the living arrangements, the schools I would be attending, and the beliefs and practices of the Fijian people.*

*However, at the end of this day I was left feeling excited and capable that I could follow through with what was required of me on the Fiji practicum.*

- ***The Pre-service Teachers' Experience***

Upon departure from Australia, and arrival in Fiji, there was a general excitement among the pre-service teachers. They were friendly towards one another and on this first night in Fiji an impromptu decision was made to share their first meal together. And so, all twenty-four pre-service teachers made their way to a local restaurant. Here, they pulled together a group of tables to make it possible for all to sit together and become acquainted with one another, sharing past experiences and views on Fiji thus far. At this moment, they had then arrived in Fiji, it was night, and there was much anticipation for the sun to rise in the morning to actually see where they were.

Over the next three days the pre-service teachers spent time exploring Fiji. They participated in two activities organised by Phil and Barbra. The first was a 'Sevu Sevu', a traditional induction ceremony into the Fijian culture that was held at a local school. This was their first experience in a Fijian school with the resources and structure impressing a number of pre-service teachers. The second activity was an organised bus trip to a local beach that again had the cohort interacting with one another. Time outside of these activities was spent at their leisure, some choosing to explore the local area by walking to the markets, taking a bus ride to the next town, or playing soccer with locals in the park adjoining the hotel. Many also relaxed in the hotel and around the pool area. Once more, observed in these moments was this continued group interaction and

comradery. They were excited about the friendly people, the relaxed culture, the fresh tropical fruit, and the warm temperatures of Fiji.

On Tuesday June 1<sup>st</sup>, each pre-service teacher spent their first day in their allocated Fijian school and on the morning of this day, Phil and Barbra requested they all meet in the hotel foyer. Here, pre-service teachers were met with their associate teachers and taken to the practicum school. Noticed in these moments were the wishes of goodluck shared, along with anxious comments and smiling faces. This friendly atmosphere continued after school with a sharing of the day's events. Many were faced with uncertainty at their schools while others only had positive comments to share, which appeared to boost the morale of everyone. A realisation was also spread amongst them that the following day would bring with it the initial assessments of their teaching by the practicum coordinators.

- *Analysis of the Experience*

Culture is defined as “the behavior, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of a particular group of people” (Mertens, 1998, p.165). These beliefs and practices represent one's schema network and when entering a new culture they are met with beliefs and practices generally different to those accustomed to:

The workplace has its own historically developed features: cultural patterns, tools and symbol systems, and social relations. (Moore, 1999, p.7)

“Culture shock” (Bishop’s University, 2004, p.1) comprises the motions one goes through when met with these new beliefs and practices. The “honeymoon stage” (Lewis University, 2001, p.1) is the first in this process, identified by the excitement and curiosity one expresses towards the new beliefs and practices. A review of the pre-service teachers reactions upon arriving in Fiji indicated that they were in this stage:

“All seemed genuinely excited today. A long day, commented by many, to get here. A few comments on the bus after arrived about how they are here to party. A few commented on how they can’t wait to see the place as it was night when arrived, commented on smell, Fijians hospitality. No real teacher talk about classrooms or lessons, very social atmosphere. ...It was announced that Monday will be a public holiday so all very excited about having this day off. Dinner was another interesting thing, a few chit-chats had. Talked to “Rod” and he seems to really want to get in on the culture. He seems well traveled and wants to stay where the locals do and drink tap water like them. Feels he hasn’t been pushed out of his comfort zone. I commented on how this might happen when in the classroom and shrugged his shoulders and said maybe.”

(Amy Tome, Participant Observation, 28/5/04)

“At the ‘Sevu Sevu’ when we were welcomed into their culture, all had to say something about themselves and many said they were excited and looking forward to teaching in the schools. But many also commented in informal conversations how they were nervous. At the ‘Sevu Sevu’ some got to meet their school principles and so some found out their class they were going to teach. There was then much talk among these people about their class and which seemed to be positive about this.”

(Amy Tome, Participant Observation, 29/5/04)

They were excited when involved in the organised activities and enthusiastic in their explorations of their new surroundings.

However, the first day spent in their Fiji practicum school brought with it a shift from the “honeymoon stage” (Lewis University, 2001, p.1) into the “hostility stage” (Lewis University, 2001, p.1). Anticipation for the unknown had now past since the pre-service teachers were now aware of where they would be teaching, living, and the new culture they were immersed in. For a number of pre-service teachers they were now moved from their “comfort zone” (Estrada, 1999, p.271) as they realised this was their reality with the smoke screen of excitement starting to disappear. Pre-service teachers then made the following comments regarding their experiences in their Fiji practicum schools:

“I think its very hard compared to my practical last year, just ... I’m still getting used to the language I have to use and my class seems to be a bit below the Australian year 5 grade so I’m trying to make my lessons more basic and instructions more clear. ...I just can’t get used to it, I’m finding it very hard. I have no idea why, I think I just expect more from the class and yesterday with Barbra she said I need to give more specific directions. ...they tell me that they know what they need to do but then they don’t ...”

(‘Megan’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“The prac itself, the actual teaching in the schools, has been a real challenge.”

(‘Leah’, Interview, 10/6/04)

Even though I was sick in the first week I think I was still hesitant, while it was an all girls school I have never taught in an all girls school and it is just totally different to Australia.”

(‘Carlene’, Interview, 11/6/04)



In regards to schema theory, this was a moment of “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2), a “... feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2). The impact of “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2) differed for each pre-service teacher due to the continuum that “culture shock” (Bishop’s University, 2004, p.1) is based on (Black & Gregersen, 1999: cited in Sims & Schraeder, 2004). Those with fewer past experiences showed a greater reaction to the differences in the new surroundings which follows through with the belief that learning while on a domestic practicum is “content-, context-, and person specific” (Calderhead & Shock, 1997: cited in George et al., 2002, p.293). That is, no two pre-service teachers shared in the exact same experiences.

According to Boud and Walker (1997), experiences coexist with reflection. Consequently, as pre-service teachers came to interact within their new surroundings through exploring the local area, they then came to reflect upon the experiences they had encountered and noticed the differences to their Australian lifestyles. Following is then a discussion of the elements new to the pre-service teachers in these surroundings, including the living arrangements that involved close proximity to peers, the role of their supervising teacher in the classroom, the role of the coordinators as assessors of their teaching, and the resources available in Lautoka Fiji.

#### **- Coping Agents and Strategies**

- *Emic Understanding*

*Upon observations of my new surroundings I came to understand the differences they presented when compared to my Australian life. However, with a great deal of time, effort, and money gone into my Honours research thus far, I was determined to be able to operate within these new surroundings so that I was able to be successful in my role as researcher. While I perceive my experience did not involve an extreme level of culture shock, I did experience cognitive dissonance, new practices and beliefs facing me and forcing me to reflect on how I could accommodate and adapt to these. Thus, personal reflective practice came into play. I also recall the relief I would feel in coming home to the hotel after a day of in-class observations and interviews. In this space, I found similarities to home, including the people networks the hotel provided, substitutes for my Australian family and friends. Interacting with them also allowed me to ‘switch off’ as researcher and see reason in this time of escapism about the challenges I faced. Peers would share their stories and I would come to understand that my challenges were not as difficult, boosting my confidence to continue.*

- ***The Pre-service Teachers’ Experiences***

Each day on the practicum brought with it new experiences for each pre-service teacher, with some better than others, though what became evident in these times were the elements of support available. Often peers would share their experiences with one another, providing support when needed and praise when appropriate. In time, the living arrangement became known as their home, a place where they found comfort and refuge from the challenges faced outside its walls. Most importantly, pre-service teachers’

recognised they could move through the challenges they faced, however intense they were, making for an enjoyable experience for many.

- *Analysis of the Experience*

In the literature, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the pre-service teachers responsibility to act upon the situation they are in when on a teaching practicum (Baird, 2002; Moore, 1999; Loughran & Russell, 1997; Johnston, 1994). As Moore (1999) outlines:

The fact that a student spends time in a knowledge-rich environment does not necessarily suggest that she acquires that knowledge. What matters is the nature of her participation in workplace activities. (Moore, 1999, p.3)

Consequently, the teaching practicum can build pre-service teachers' knowledge as long as they are interactive in the environment (Loughran & Russell, 1997). Thus, on the Fiji practicum, pre-service teachers were only able to overcome the challenges they faced in the field if they had an initial desire to do so. In my participant observation, I was able to witness the isolation pre-service teachers placed themselves in when they were initially faced with challenge. Though, I was also able to observe them as they surfaced and interacted within their new surroundings. Thus, there was a desire within the pre-service teachers to participate in the practicum, which entailed an overcoming of elements that caused them "cognitive dissonance" (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2):

“Sometimes [problems in the classroom] scare me but then I think oh well got to do it so I sit down and try and think of something to do ... cause you can’t just walk out, you’ve got to get through it.”

(‘Jenna’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“I’ve wanted to make a good impression, I wanted to make Australian teachers the best and make every single lesson innovative.”

(‘Julie’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I think making them feel comfortable with me has been a real effort, I’ve been exhausted every day, but I’ve continued because I love it.”

(‘Karen’, Interview, 9/6/04)

This desire for success seemed to drive their motivation to surpass the challenges they faced. According to Knowles (1997), this is due to the internal pressures adult’s experience, motivating their readiness to learn and deal with real life situations they are in. Pre-service teachers then took on the responsibility of their role and towards their own learning. This element of responsibility also recognised as one of Cambourne’s (2000) “condition of learning” (2000, p.415-416).

Evident in this process to overcome the challenges they faced were their interactions with people around them which not only provided them with comfort but also strategies on how to move forward. Communication with peers has also been identified by Cambourne (2000) with responses they provide often guiding one’s learning. In the literature, the utilisation of support has been recognised for its positive impact in facing

challenges (Sims & Schraeder, 2004; Arkin, 1993). Thus, coping agents are employed when one experiences “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2) and expresses a desire to overcome the uncertainty (Endler, 1997: cited in Bouchard, 2003, p.1). Data showed that this was the case for pre-service teachers on the Fiji practicum. They were out of their “comfort zone” (Graham, 1996, p.31), living and teaching without access to familiar networks which as Moore (1999) outlines, are drawn upon when dealing with challenging situations:

As the participants engage in work activity, they collaborate in interpreting the situation, using tools and thinking about what is going on and what needs to be done. The newcomer tries to make sense of what’s going on based on her previous experience and on the current distribution of cognitive and other work; people and tools mediate her participation, affording her access to the stock of knowledge in use in the activity system.  
(Moore, 1999, p.7)

In pre-service teachers’ attempts to “make sense of what’s going on” (Moore, 1999, p.7), they interacted with, and drew support from, coping agents and strategies which included their peers, the coordinators, personal reflective practice, and the living arrangement. These also provided an element of collaboration as “other beings in our social communities become our greatest treasures” (Thayer-Bacon, 1998, p.209: cited in Solomon, 2000, p.954). Knowles (1997) theory provides reason for why this is the case, recognising that each person holds knowledge from their own unique past experiences, thus the resource that peers can then become.

With the assistance of these elements, pre-service teachers could assimilate their pre-existing knowledge with the beliefs and practices that had at first caused them “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2). This then allowed them to be effective within their new surroundings in their role of pre-service teacher, implying that they had merged into the “humour” and “home stage” (Lewis University, 2001, p.1) of “culture shock” (Bishop’s University, 2004, p.1), when one is able to adjust and assimilate to the culture they have entered.

**Peers:** While the close proximity shared between pre-service teachers was a living arrangement they were not familiar with, pre-service teachers soon learned how to utilise this situation to their advantage. They became accustomed to preparing lessons together, finding that an element of collaboration improved their lessons:

“Its been good with like ‘Emily’ and ‘Chris’. Every time we’ve written lesson plans we sit together and do it so we’ve been sharing ideas and doing eachothers lessons. So that’s good cause we get a variety of resources by using other people resources.”

(‘Jenna’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“Oh they’ve helped me so much and I don’t know, I normally talk to ‘Catherine’ and ‘Carlene’ about what I’m doing in my lessons and they’ve helped me with borrowing resources and yeah, different things. And yeah it’s nice to have people around, I didn’t know anyone before I came here so its nice to have all these people around to get along and hang out and relax with, it’s excellent.”

(‘Megan’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“But just coming over here a lot of us didn’t really know anyone, there was just

such a great bond and with like organising lessons and things like that, everyone was there for each other, helping each other, planning the lessons and sharing resources and without each other, like the others, I really don't think I could have done it on my own. ...I think it started on the plane over, like everyone was still hesitant but everyone was still sort of introducing themselves but I think it was the daunting fact that we're going to have to go and teach on Tuesday and for me, I wanted help with, I wanted to see what others are teaching, and so I came out and sort of discussed that and that is how we all sort of just clicked, I don't know. We're all here for the same reasons so with that the main thing, that we all came to teach, for that reason it's easy to come together because we've got that common interest."

(‘Carlene’, Interview, 11/6/04)

Pre-service teachers found they were working towards a common goal, which Eisen (2001) believes, supports the development of relationships among peers. And, as these pre-service teachers mentioned, they were able to confront the challenge that they faced with the paucity of resources and share what they brought with them amongst each other. This ability of peers to provide solutions to each other's problems through combined knowledge is also identified by Solomon (2000), finding in his study that peers enhance one another's path towards learning.

More specifically, ‘John’ was experiencing problems in his implementation of an English lesson based on essay writing. Aware of the knowledge he lacked in this topic area he sought advice from peers who suggested various approaches he could take. Yet, even with their assistance he still failed to implement the lesson successfully. To his dismay, this was also in the presence of the coordinator, Barbra, who was assessing his teaching.

However, this proved to be beneficial for him as Barbra provided him with constructive criticism which when he employed found was successful in supporting the students' learning. This path to success highlights another coping agent available on the Fiji practicum, the coordinators Phil and Barbra.

**The Coordinators:** Initially, the task of assessment carried out by the coordinators, Phil and Barbra, was looked upon with uncertainty. Pre-service teachers were not familiar with Phil and Barbra's beliefs and practices within the classroom and were not accustomed to having university lecturers assessing their teaching. However, the advice provided by the coordinators was looked upon with appreciation since their supervising teachers' ability to fulfil the primary role of a supervising teacher, by supporting their learning (McJunkin, Justen, Strickland & Justen, 1998), was limited. Coordinators then provided a relationship that is viewed upon as a "core component" (Shantz & Brown, 1999, p.694) of a domestic practicum. These assessments then became a real opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn about teaching through the positive and constructive feedback they were offered:

"I'm discovering new ways to find out how they have learnt and without coming here I don't think I would have gotten that because having a supervisor like Phil and Barbra who can really analyse, even though they are not there that often, they can really analyse your lesson and break it down and find those little tiny tiny points, I wasn't getting that from my last practicum in Australia. I was just getting 'oh that was excellent, you had the kids paying attention, that was good'. Now I'm getting the good parts but I'm getting it broken down into what I really



really need to work on.”

(‘Samuel’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“Constructive criticisms, they’ve certainly helped my teaching style, the evaluations I’ve had, they’ve been brilliant, simple suggestions that are very worthwhile, I was using them today all ready and I couldn’t believe the difference.”

(‘Ken’, Interview, 9/6/04)

This resulted in a positive undertone towards their assessment of lessons as it implied direct feedback upon their teaching in action. In the literature, this utilisation of feedback is regarded as an ideal method towards a pre-service teacher’s ability to improve (Tjeerdsma, 1998: cited in Coulon & Lorenzo, 2003).

According to Maitino (2000), the supervising teacher must also understand the personal qualities and capacities of the pre-service teacher in order to cater for their learning abilities and needs. Since the coordinators were the quasi supervising teachers they then needed to cater for the needs of the pre-service teachers while in Fiji. And, according to a number of pre-service teachers, this was the case. They commented on the independent time that the coordinators provided them on the practicum and the ad hoc availability of support when necessary:

“Phil and Barbra have been really good, helpful, I haven’t really seen that much of them since I’ve been here but I feel I can go ask them for help with anything

or with resources of anything.”

(‘Jenna’, Interview, 8/6/04)

Beyond the academic department, they’re really great people, they’re really supportive, they’re really friendly, they’re easy to approach, they’re understanding, compassionate, they seem to really care, maybe a little bit over protective at times but that may be due to previous experiences, that might be due to University protocol, I don’t know but it seems to be getting better as time goes on, which I appreciate being one of the older students.”

(‘Ken’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I don’t feel abandoned at all because they gave me that sort of ‘this is what you do’ so I didn’t feel like when I went into the school like I was on egg shells because they told me what to do, because I had a little bit of a base. With this little bit of a base I have been able to build my personality into their cultural system rather than just sit there and stay on this little base and do what I’ve been told.”

(‘Julie’, Interview, 9/6/04)

Coordinators also noted that they chose to refrain from the organisation of all the pre-service teachers’ time out of school, instead leaving it to the responsibility of the pre-service teachers. Knowles (1990) recognised this element in adult learning, identifying that adults generally benefit from opportunities to self-direct their own learning.

**Personal Reflective Practice:** According to Spalding and Wilson (2002), the process of reflection begins when “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2) is experienced. And, according to Boud and Walker (1997), it can provide an understanding of one’s experiences. Consequently, pre-service teachers employed this

process as they underwent different experiences and extremes of “culture shock” (Bishop’s University, 2004, p.1), finding it a coping strategy that provided them with solace:

“[Reflection] matters a lot actually, it helps me get my thoughts all organised and I like writing it down because ... I’m having a really hard time so it’s just helping me sort everything out and I just feel like heaps relieved when it’s all written down.”

(‘Emily’, Interview, 7/6/04)

“I think [reflections] been huge because once I’ve run a lesson ... like my first lesson Phil was there so I knew what I had done wrong and then he told me some other things that I could work on. And, to do the next lesson I tried to think over to do those things a bit better. ...After every lesson I think back on what I could have done better or even when I’m doing the lessons ...”

(‘Megan’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“Oh yes reflection has played a role because stuff I have written, I don’t know, it just helps you express your feelings about that day and then you just learn. But if on one day you have really bad classroom management, you sit down and write reflections. It’s just like talking to yourself, ‘what do I need to do to make this better?’ And you try that the next day and if it works then you just go for it.”

(‘Clare’, Interview, 10/6/04)

“Yeah reflections good especially in this sort of situation where it’s a completely different environment so where able to go ‘next time its best to do this’. Like I think it’s good doing reflection but more sort of experiencing it.”

(‘Julie’, Interview, 9/6/04)

Reflection allows one to understand why “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2) occurs and how it can be overcome (Langley & Senne, 1997). For pre-service teachers in Fiji, this provided a “praxis” (Kinsella, 2001, p.198) between their actions and their learning, making it possible to develop solutions to the “cognitive dissonance” (ChangingMinds.org, 2004, p.2) that they experienced. ‘Samuel’ highlighted the need for this strategy more so because of the absence of feedback from his supervising teacher. Reflection was then a “route to self-knowledge” (Trupe, 2001, p.1) for ‘Samuel, with learning then a product of the reflection process (Ferraro, 2000; Trupe, 2001).

When reviewing the reflective journals, these artifacts became a “window” (Slifkin, 2001, p.5) into the pre-service teachers developing understandings and experiences:

“Why didn’t I listen to my own advice? Yesterday I wrote that I shouldn’t give specific instructions. But when I get into the classroom I get too excited and forget and launch into a lesson. This was not a good thing to do when Phil was assessing me. ...As for my blackboard skills, they leave little to the imagination. ...I really hate chalkboards. Fijian chalk seems to suck the moisture out of your fingers. It produces copious amounts of dust which the students in 301 told me all day yesterday. I like whiteboards better, but most classes don’t have one so I guess it’s butcher’s paper and cardboard for me.”

(‘Clare’, Reflective Journal, 2/6/04)

“... the form 5 girls wanted to learn a new dance so off-the-top of my head I taught them the heel & toe polka. They picked the steps up well and enjoyed the lesson. Also, I’m finding teaching more than 30 students at a time very challenging, though fun. These students make it easier as they are so motivated and energetic. All forms are very physically fit. I also found that I’m being more

innovative. I played netball with the form 4 girls. They then wanted to play volleyball so I pretended to be the net and the girls had to hit the ball over me. They also enjoyed this game.”

(‘Sandra’, Reflective Journal, 8/6/04)

‘Chris’ commented that since the personal reflective journal was a compulsory task, that he was then forced to think deeply about the situation he was in, something he believed he would have otherwise skimmed over. However, some pre-service teachers did mention how they could not see value in writing down their reflections:

“For me I think reflection comes more naturally rather than forced. I don’t sit down and think about it, its just everything I see, everything I hear, I just kind of think about it.”

(‘Harry’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“Reflection as in talking-about-it, a lot, that’s a form of reflection. Talking to other people, that’s played a huge role in helping me devise my lessons plans and helping me prepare for all the stuff I’ve got to do at school. It also helped me through hard classes, being able to talk to other prac students about some of the shocking classes I’ve had.”

(‘Karen’, Interview, 9/6/04)

But as ‘Leah’ stated:

“At first I was thinking what a tedious mundane thing, but again the theorizing about reflection is true. I think it is a pain as in a sense that it is a task that you

have to do every day but once you've got it there in front of you, I mean everything I have shared with you wouldn't have made sense to me, I mean it would have been ideas in the back of my head, but its been through reflection especially straight after the lesson that that's been made clear to me. So it provides clarity."

(‘Leah’, Interview, 10/6/04)

### **- Personal and Professional Understandings**

- ***Emic Understanding***

*While I was not teaching, I was to conduct research, a new task for me, and also do this within new surroundings. Though, however challenging the situation appeared to me, I felt confident in my ability due to the support readily available. Consequently, I was able to negate my way through the Fiji practicum and come to the end having grown in numerous ways. While traveling from school to school, I came to realise the confidence I had developed, I was no longer anxious and felt a comfort and familiarity in my new surroundings.*

- ***Etic Understanding***

The pre-service teachers' last day of teaching, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> June, brought with it mixed emotions. They expressed sadness in leaving though joy in having had this experience. For some pre-service teachers, the Fiji practicum was an opportunity that impacted greatly upon their personal growth and for others, comments were focused on the professional growth they had made through their experiences both inside and outside the classroom.

- *Analysis of the experience*

As Clandinin (2000) stated, "... teachers hold knowledge that comes from experience, is learned in context, and is expressed in practice" (2000, p.28). Hence, if pre-service teachers are active within their surroundings then they are assisting their growth in knowledge, having an opportunity to develop and expand their schema network (Bartlett, 1932: cited in Prester, 2002). Through my participant observations I was able to observe this occur on the Fiji practicum. Not only did pre-service teachers recognise the differences in their new surroundings but they also came to new understandings on a personal and professional level:

"Well I think the experience of teaching in another country and especially a country not as progressed maybe as Australia. ... I think really now teaching in any school back home, this has helped me in a way because I have taught those less privileged that it would make it so much easier to go back and teach kids with computers, with all resources, with money just to buy simple things that they might need for the classroom. They've got everything back home where here they don't so it was a lot harder to teach and so I think going back home will be a piece of cake, well I'm hoping anyway."

(‘Carlene’, Interview, 11/6/04)

"Well I'm learning and growing, the more I'm thrown into a situation like this the more I learn to deal, the more I learn to cope. ...At a prac at home I'd usually be in my comfort zone and I'd be commuting from home, I'd have the support of my family, I'd be close to uni so I'd have the support from my lecturers, not that I can't here but ... it's just not home."

(‘Louise’, Interview, 10/6/04)

Thus, while the domestic practicum has been recognised as “the most important and challenging component of [a pre-service teacher’s] course” (Broadbent, 1998, p.27), so to can the Fiji practicum. This growth from an overseas teaching experience was also evident in Fast’s (2000) experience, who found that “living and working in another culture provided learning experiences every minute of every day ... One cannot fail to grow in numerous and unexpected ways” (2000, p.101). Falconer (2003), Holt-Willard (2001), and McKay and Montgomery (1995) also revealed in their studies that personal and professional growth results from overseas teaching practicums, with Falconer (2003) identifying the following as elements of growth:

1) they learned what it means to try to function in a new culture without language fluency and without familiarity with the “standards” for behavior, 2) they gained significant insight into some of their own prejudices relating to Mexico and Mexican people and they gained empathy for those who must function in a new culture, 3) they left thinking about how they would use these new insights as they develop their ideas for teaching and for advocating for their Mexican children as well as other minority or immigrant children in their classes. (Falconer, 2003, p.21)

Similarity can then be seen between these and the understandings that pre-service teachers came to on the 2004 Fiji practicum. On a personal level, pre-service teachers on the Fiji practicum developed a greater ability to accept beliefs and practices different to theirs, had a new-found appreciation for opportunities provided to them, and experienced a growth in their confidence. And on a professional level, their understanding, and repertoire, of teaching strategies expanded and improved, their ability to adapt and



improvise developed, and the effectiveness of a student-teacher relationship based on respect was realised. Thus, in relation to the understandings that Faulconer (2003) recognised, the pre-service teachers on the Fiji practicum also developed an ability to operate within another culture through acceptance and adaption, they also came to appreciate their Australian lifestyles by experiencing and observing the practices of the Fijians that they perceived as more challenging, and they also left Fiji with new teaching strategies that they could employ.

However, it must also be recognised that this restructuring of schema varied in intensity for each pre-service teacher. This follows through with the notion that each pre-service teachers' experience on a domestic practicum is unique, "content-, context-, and person specific" (Calderhead & Shock, 1997: cited in George et al., 2002, p.293). Pre-service teachers who had experienced teaching overseas, or had extensive overseas travel experience, appeared to grow more on a professional level, feeling they were able to concentrate on how they could improve their teaching rather than how to live in a new culture:

"Overall, coming into a new culture, a different style school setting and not knowing who this will all work is very exciting, a bit unnerving and definitely an adventure. Having experienced 'culture shock' before I feel I can better jump into this experience and enjoy it, knowing what that takes. I am happy, so very happy with my class and don't feel too pressured in the classroom."

( 'Chris', Reflective Journal, 1/6/04)

“India changed every area of my life. Fiji has been more to do with teaching.”

(‘Catherine’, Interview, 10/6/04)

### **Personal growth**

**Acceptance:** Upon arrival in Lautoka Fiji, pre-service teachers were excited about the experience they had just embarked upon. Though, after spending their first day in their Fijian practicum school, many came to realise that this was reality and notice the differences to their own beliefs and practices. In order to provide for their own ability to succeed in their positions as pre-service teachers, many came to accept the differences that they were presented with.

For example, ‘Emily’ became aware of this quality she held by learning to accept her supervising teacher’s beliefs and practices, realising he was teaching in a manner that he was taught to. Other pre-service teachers also mentioned their growing ability to accept as a result of the Fiji practicum:

“... if you sent your kid to school and they came home and they said ‘mum I’ve been cleaning toilets for an hour you’d probably call the school and tell them that that’s unhygienic and gross. Whereas it’s like second nature to them and they do it cause they know they have to and they want to keep their school clean and they want to sweep the floor cause they want their floor to be clean because they walk around on it. So the culture to me sometimes boggles my mind, like I can’t believe it, but if these kids are fine with it then I think, you know, it’s great.”

(‘Rose’, Interview, 3/6/04)

“I have to catch the bus every day and its normal for the teachers to catch the bus with the kids which I think is good and in Australia you never really see the people hop on the bus with the students, but that’s what they do and I’ve enjoyed that.”

(‘Sandra’, Interview, 9/8/04)

“We have a bell that rings pretty much consistently but our schedule is erratic cause they have three different Friday schedules and they’ve been just kind of tossing in those different schedules throughout the week randomly which is a little bit absurd as far as I’m concerned but it’s a different culture and things are different, I’m not going to criticise it, but accept it and manage.”

(‘Ken’, Interview, 9/6/04)

**Appreciation:** According to the pre-service teachers, there were fewer resources within the schools and limited opportunities within the Fijian culture when compared to the Australian. And, through experiencing these challenges that the Fijians faced, such as planning lessons with the same access to resources as they had, pre-service teachers came to a greater appreciation of their Australian culture, an element of growth also recognised in the research of McKay and Montgomery (1995). ‘Rose’ came to this understanding through the positive nature and respect that students showed towards her and each other:

“I just learnt that ... it doesn’t matter what they have cause they really have nothing, ... they are still so happy. Like it doesn’t matter that they don’t have this or they don’t have that, ... like they are just so happy to be themselves. ...They don’t take advantage of anything they have, ... that impacts me a lot, huge.”

(‘Rose’, Interview, 3/6/04)

‘Rod’ also came to this understanding as a result of the practicum, realising how fortunate he was for the opportunities available to him in Australia. While wanting to help the Fijians, he felt the best thing he could do was recognise how positive they remained in the face of adversity and planned to take onboard a similar manner upon returning to Australia:

“A lot of times in Australia I fall into that trap thinking about what I don’t have in the classroom, what I don’t have at school, what I don’t have in my life and all that sort of stuff and sometimes I am a bit negative when Australia is a great place, a great country. So, I suppose I’m constantly learning here that no matter where you are, no matter where you live or in what situation you can always ... it’s up to you, it’s up to yourself to chose whether you view it as a positive thing or a negative thing and in any experience in any place in the world you can always pull out negative aspects in life or you can pull out positive aspects. So yes, I think it is ... and that’s what I’m learning more everyday, ...They were playing soccer today and a lot of them didn’t have soccer boots and I just felt like sending over like a whole package of soccer boots when I get back to Australia but it was like, I’m sure it would have some sort of a tiny impact, and I know the saying ‘think globally, act locally’ sort of thing, but it’s probably not going to help them that much in any real way. I think that the best thing for all people is to be educated, to learn to think for themselves and learn to be creative and be positive.”

(‘Rod’, Interview, 7/6/04)

This change in perspective and growth in appreciation was also expressed by a number of other pre-service teachers, proving to have an immense impact upon the 2004 cohort:

“I’ve learnt that I’ve had a lot of opportunities which maybe I’ve taken’ for granted, that’s for sure. ...Just in life in general. There is so much more opportunity outside of Lautoka that these children don’t get, they don’t really get sort of a push to go beyond what they do in school.”

(‘Samuel’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I’ve just learnt probably more just to appreciate everything that we do have. Like ... other kids are sort of more disadvantaged so you come to appreciate everything that you have.”

(‘Erin’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I’m very lucky to live in Australia and have the things that I do.”

(‘Megan’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“I learnt so much from them, ...about their culture and like the difference from Australia, like we take things for granted and they don’t have the things we have and do things the hard way.”

(‘Carlene’, Interview, 11/6/04)

**Confidence:** Through recognising and overcoming their challenges, pre-service teachers found strength within themselves, a realisation that they are capable people. They then grew in confidence, which was also an element of growth that McKay and Montgomery (1995) identified in their study. Consequently, as further challenges arose they expressed an awareness of their ability to overcome them, becoming less apprehensive and more positive in their approach:

“I’m much more confident in the classroom, I’m not really sure why this prac has made me more confident, I think it’s just practice because last prac I really only taught a couple of lessons and this prac I taught more on my first day than I did before.”

(‘Jenna’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“[The Fiji practicum] has definitely built my confidence. I have a bit more confidence now that if I do get thrown into a situation and I do have to teach and I haven’t been able to plan that much that I will probably be able to teach it successfully, cause that’s happened a couple times here. So definitely confidence building even though it has been quite challenging and hard, but that’s been good cause it’s shown me that I can do it.”

(‘Catherine’, Interview, 10/6/04)

“I was worried about traveling overseas because I’d never done it before and didn’t know what to expect. Now, I could travel anyway and it doesn’t worry me. I know I’ve only been here two weeks but I guess I’m kind of use to it, I know that sounds weird but, but just being by myself cause usually I do a lot of things with my family whereas now I have the opportunity to do what I want to do. I know I’m still with friends, but its just me ... but now I just don’t want it to end cause I just love it here.”

(‘Clare’, Interview, 10/6/04)

An element affecting the pre-service teachers’ confidence was the presence of their supervising teacher. A number of pre-service teachers commented on the absence of their supervising teacher in the classroom and the benefit this provided them, as ‘Ken’ and ‘Julie’ stated:

“For sure not having the supervisor in my room assessing me everyday, it has been nice to kind of take the reigns and feel comfortable that it is my class which is nice.”

(‘Ken’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I’ve always sort of felt restricted in my practice teaching because I’ve been teaching since I was fifteen years old, I’ve been coaching, I’ve been doing everything, and I take classes and now that I’m here I feel like I’ve been employed as a casual teacher, I feel like professionally I have developed so much more in the last two weeks then you can at uni just because I haven’t had that whole ‘you have to do things this way’ I’ve done things my way ... without worrying about anyone else.”

(‘Julie’, Interview, 9/6/04)

## **Professional Growth**

**Expanded repertoire of teaching strategies:** Due to the communication barrier between pre-service teachers and both their supervising teacher and the students, pre-service teachers had to review their approaches to teaching, particularly their explaining and questioning techniques:

“Oh [my questioning technique] had definitely improved. Without this prac my questioning technique was definitely not there. I was just saying “Does everyone understand?” and it probably wasn’t the right thing to be doing, but kids in Australia would stick up their hand and say “I don’t understand” and I’d have a chance to explain ti but here they just say ‘yes’ when really they don’t understand. So now I’ve changed my whole questioning, “How did we do it? Why did we do it? What did we do?”

(‘Samuel’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“But when it comes to explaining how to do things and being explicit and all that, that’s been really good cause they don’t understand. ... I’m getting better at being explicit and explaining how to do things”

(‘Jenna’, Interview, 8/6/04)

“Just the instructions, you have to be so clear and concise with these girls, you basically have to talk to them very slowly and I think I’ll take that away because once I start to speak slowly I pronounce every word, I show demonstrations, I’ll now bring that back with me so I’ll be doing the same things at school, so I’ll know that my instructions have to be very clear.”

(‘Angela’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I guess for myself I think I’ve come to explain things better, like considering the language barrier, and demonstrate things better ...”

(‘Erin’, Interview, 9/6/04)

‘Leah’ also noticed, as did a number of other pre-service teachers, that teaching through textbooks was a common method employed in Fiji to prepare students for exams. Through having to implement such lessons and covering many concepts in single lessons, she gained a greater awareness of the time that students need to develop understandings and the need for variety in her approach:

“The amount my supervising teacher insisted that I cover in one lesson was absurd. This restricted me from being able to teach richly about each given concept. It also prevented me from making each area more real than a mere concept to the students. I touched on things but the passion that is literature is difficult to share when you have to look at so many things in one hour!”

(‘Leah’, Reflective Journal, 2/6/04)



With the freedom that some pre-service teachers were extended in the classroom, they were then able to experiment with approaches. ‘Chris’s’ art lesson was an example of this. Since he was given the freedom to teach what he pleased, he chose to implement an art lesson which unfortunately did not follow through as planned. However, upon reflection he learnt how he could be more effective when implementing similar lessons in the future.

**Adaption:** Fast (2000) mentioned in his experience, “I discovered the importance of adapting not only my teaching strategies but also my thoughts and actions to their culture” (2000, p.100). This element of adaption was evident within the pre-service teachers’ experiences. While not all pre-service teachers were provided with the same freedom as mentioned in ‘Chris’s’ experience, they still seemed to be able to negate an approach to teaching that was to the approval of their supervising teacher and their own personal beliefs on teaching. For example, ‘Emily’ found that her new-found ability to adapt allowed her to overcome challenges she faced with her supervising teacher, agreeing to teach the textbook lessons he requested of her but altering them to comply with her own beliefs on teaching.

This ability to adapt was even more apparent in their approach to the resources available to them. For example, while ‘Chris’ felt there were limited resources and that it presented an obstacle in preparing lessons, he did find that it allowed him to grow in versatility:

“... I’m use to planning at home where I can get a lot of things pretty quickly. To do it here I might get some ideas for a lesson but ‘oh I can’t get the stuff’. So the idea of the lesson gets scrapped or it gets adapted to a way that I think that maybe isn’t as good. So it’s a good test of versatility and trying to use what you can and making the best of what you have.”

(‘Chris’, Interview, 8/6/04)

‘Susan’s’ experiences also alluded to this element of adaption through having to teach lessons with little time to prepare. One such occasion involved her arriving at school only to find she was to teach a different class for an entire day, taking the place of a casual teacher:

“I had a different class today, the teacher from the other year 7 class was away all morning so I got to take their class which was really good ... Well I sort of had a few lesson plans up my sleeve that I could do just in case I was put on the spare of the moment. But having said that, I did try and follow their syllabus cause apparently there classroom is very strict ... so I just basically saw that there were maps and you could do maps and so I just grabbed my map of Australia and just did 2 hours on that, ... I think I could have taught the whole day just from a map of Australia. ... It was good because I’m learning more and more about using limited resources and just the way that you can teach kids. You don’t have to use all these great inventions you just need to relate to them.”

(‘Susan’, Interview, 8/6/04)

A number of other teachers also mentioned their growing ability to adapt, indicated through the improvisation and flexibility they employed in their approach to teaching:

“Like I’ve even learnt some words in Hindu because the teachers just like ‘just say sit down’ and he taught me how to say it cause they just don’t understand English.”

(‘Erin’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“I guess I’ve found it a little bit easier because there’s not a supervising teacher watching me every lesson and writing an observation report. ...It has allowed me to improvise, okay today we’re going to do this’, like I don’t have to structure my lesson and do what I had structured, I have a lesson plan but I never go by it, see I always change according to the students. Whereas if the teacher was marking that she would be going ‘where’s the warm-up?’ or ‘why didn’t you do this?’”

(‘Erin’, Interview, 9/6/04)

“Flexibility aswell, like being put on the spot. Like they talk about flexibility in the beginning of your Dip Ed and you think its just common sense but by being put on the spot like you are here in Fiji you learn the reality of what it’s like to be flexible. ...I think that’s when you’ve got to think on your feet, you know you’ve got to draw on your own broad range of knowledge ...”

(‘Leah’, Interview, 10/6/04)

**Development of student-teacher relationships:** The importance of developing student-teacher relationships based on respect was recognised by a number of pre-service teachers while on the Fiji practicum. ‘John’ came to realise this as students became disruptive during his second week of teaching. When Barbra observed this, she advised

him that it was due to the type of student-teacher relationship he had developed which involved him as their friend rather than teacher. Due to the respect that the students had shown towards him, he initially believed he would not have to emphasise the need for discipline, however, this proved to be an ill-fated decision as his novelty value in the classroom wore thin. Consequently, when he changed his approach, enforcing management strategies, he found their behaviour begun to improve.

Other pre-service teachers also made reference to their growing understanding of the ideal student teacher relationship, including ‘Sharon’, who was inspired by a Fijian teacher:

“One of the lady’s, she’s really nice, ... she’s an inspiration, ... by the way she talks to the students as if they’re friends, ...it makes the students more comfortable definitely and maybe makes them want to participate more. ...It has impacted me with my teaching, to have that teacher-student relationship because you’ll get more out of them.”

(‘Sharon’, Interview, 9/6/04)

‘Chris’ also found the Fiji practicum to be a valuable opportunity for him to understand how to develop such a relationship as on past practicum’s he had been unsuccessful in his approach:

“[The Fiji practicum’s] good for learning how to walk into a classroom and deal with the kids. A lot of the stuff I do is to do with my relations with the kids and how to get the best relationship with them to help them learn. ...So trying to figure out what the best way to get a good relationship with them is, this has been very useful for that. Cause I think kids are kids no matter where you go, ...everyone’s individual, you just have to figure out how to get through to them and I think that’s the same in any country isn’t it. You know, if you can connect with them or, and earn their respect or get their interest then you’re ok and then the teaching sort of goes from there. So for me, that’s probably one of the most useful things I’ve got, just, I mean I do that in Australia, I tried to do that in Australian pracs and I tried to do that in Nepal and I’ve tried to do that here and I’m sort of getting a better idea of how to do it. In Australia I was too much the kids friend during first year prac and that made it hard sometimes when you were trying to be discipline person, you know the kids just think they can do whatever they want cause they think they’re you’re a friend.”

(‘Chris’, Interview, 7/6/04)

‘Chris’ then found the benefit of a relationship based on respect and how it was more supportive of students’ learning, as did ‘Rose’:

“I think that you learn better when you like your teacher, you want to learn for them, you want to do well for them instead of ... like everyone wants to do well for themselves but to ... I think you want to show the teacher that you are listening to her and doing well for her cause you like her. If you don’t like her why would you want to do work in her class.”

(‘Rose’, 9/6/04)

## Conclusion

While the previous points are self explanatory, we have decided to finish this paper by giving the students who participated the final voice.

“Overall the prac was a success and one of the best experiences I’ve had in my life. The people and culture was amazing! It made me realize how lucky we really are. ...The experience will be with me forever. It was great!”

(‘Erin’, Reflective Journal, 11/6/04)

“Today was very emotional and very rewarding. We spent the last day finishing our final assignments before playing some games and singing some songs. I was deeply touched by the students’ thoughts and words for me. Days like today always remind me that teaching is the best profession in the world and certainly the most rewarding. My efforts do make a difference in the lives of those that I teach. I must continue to work hard and make myself a better person as well as a better teacher. Practice makes perfect!”

(‘Ken’, Reflective Journal, 11/6/04)

“At recess the teaching staff gave ‘Louise’ and I a present and my teacher gave me a reference with words that I’ll never forget. The teaching staff were so grateful and happy for us being there. This experience has changed my way of teaching with time management and letting the class flow. Also with improvisation as these schools didn’t have a lot of equipment. This experience also opened my eyes to how lucky Australian children, schools, and teachers are. In saying that I’ll be glad to get home.”

(‘Sharon’, Reflective Journal, 11/6/04)

“I believe that this practical experience has offered me so much that I will be able to take with me and sue use as a future teacher. This includes using minimum resources, adjusting to a different culture and the way that they do things.

Having the ability to be flexible with the way that I do things and therefore having the know-how to think on the spot and alter the learning experience or situation if needed. I feel that from this practical experience I have grown as a future teacher, I am now more aware of the aspects in which I need to focus on and understand how reflecting will assist me in my journey to becoming a successful teacher.”

(‘Megan’, Reflective Journal, 11/6/04)

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