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Issues in Assessing International Pre-service Teachers during the Field Experience: A
Pilot Study

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Abstract

The internationalisation of higher education is a global phenomenon and Australian universities in particular are experiencing increasing cultural diversity in their student population. This is true also in the cohorts of pre-service teachers in education faculties. This paper explores some issues in assessing international pre-service teachers from the perspectives of lecturing staff, liaison staff and supervising classroom teachers during field experience. The authors present preliminary data from a pilot project in which participants representing these three roles were interviewed. Participants were asked to describe their experiences, beliefs and attitudes to the assessment of international pre-service students during field experience, with particular emphasis on ethical issues that arose during these experiences. The findings suggest concerns around a lack of international students' English language proficiency, insufficient background information for these students on schooling in Australia, limited information for supervising teachers to support these students during field experience, and inconsistent approaches to grading students against assessment criteria.

The authors discuss some implications for the support of international students as they undertake field experience in Australian settings. Active recruiting of international students suggests that Australian universities have an ethical responsibility to provide adequate support for students who may have English as an additional language. In addition, experiences of teachers supervising international students in the field may be enhanced by clear expectations on approaches to assessing these students.

Solutions to some of the challenges faced by lecturing staff, liaison staff and supervising teachers may lie in increased support from universities as they seek to prepare EAL students more effectively for their field experience in Australian settings. Improved communication between lecturing staff, liaison staff and supervising teachers may also promote greater consistency with regard to the assessment of EAL students in the field. While the data emerging from this pilot study suggest that such solutions may improve the experience of staff and students within this context, is such support viable in the long term? This paper poses the question as to whether, in a climate of reduced funding to the tertiary sector in Australia, such increased support is sustainable.

Keywords: Teacher education; higher education; international students; field experience

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the attitudes of staff to the assessment of pre-service international student teachers in their field experience. This investigation is part of a larger study being conducted by the authors, examining the dilemmas involved in all aspects of assessing international pre-service students at university.

The internationalisation of higher education is a global phenomenon and Australian universities in particular are experiencing increasing cultural diversity in their student population. This is true also of the cohorts of preservice teachers studying in Australian education faculties. International students make up approximately 24% of the total Australian university student population with approximately 82% of them coming from Asian countries (DEST, 2005). With this increase in international students institutions need to review their pedagogy to ensure quality learning and teaching for both domestic and international students. Part of any review of quality is to review assessment methods. However, while there is a growing body of research on the international student experience, there has been little attention given to the impact of international students on academic staff and in particular on assessment (Brown, 2007).

The gaining of a Western degree and studying in an English-speaking country are considered major advantages for most Asian students in gaining employment in their home country. As a result, Australia has become a significant player in the Asian education market due to its close proximity to the region and its ability to offer quality, English-speaking university courses. Additionally, living expenses and tuition fees in Australia are less expensive for Asian students than in other western countries located further away. Furthermore, Australia has a reputation for being a safe and pleasant environment with some international students seeking permanent residency on completion of their studies. Overseas students are an important source of revenue for Australian universities. In 2005, revenue from full-fee paying international students represented 15% of all revenue within the higher education sector (ABS, 2007). Overseas enrolments provide the critical mass needed to diversify the range of educational programs on offer. Additionally, the presence of international students benefits all students, as well as the community – providing an opportunity for domestic students to experience and expand their knowledge of other languages and cultures.

Most international students arrive in Australia and begin lectures with the rest of the cohort within weeks. While for some education students, especially those coming from an English speaking background, this presents minimal problems of adjusting to another culture, for those students with English as an additional language there are many stressors relating to living and studying in a different country. These students have often reported problems with language, communication and cultural differences which have had a negative impact on their studies. They have reported feeling isolated, experiencing financial worries and racism, which sometimes contributed to their withdrawal from study (Watts Pailliotet, 1997). Furthermore, it has been found that many of these students did not seek help because they did not know who to talk to and/or did not want to be seen as ‘complainers’. Instead they tried to manage on their own (Givens & Bennett, 2004) as they are often reluctant to

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seek help outside their family and friends as they are fearful of the social stigma of failure (Back & Barker, 2002). These challenges are especially pronounced during the pre-service teachers' experience in their field placement.

Field experience placements in schools are a vital component of all pre-service teachers' education program (Touchon & Gwyn-Paquette, 2003). Education institutions often assume that field experiences help teachers to bridge the cultural gap between their own backgrounds and those of their students (Farber & Armaline, 1994). However, for some international pre-service teachers, their cultural background and language differences act as a barrier to successfully completing their field experiences. Consequently, these students often feel disconnected from their supervising teacher, the students in the classroom, and the whole schooling experience, which leaves them feeling vulnerable, isolated, confused and threatened.

Academic staff are also concerned that their assessment is culturally fair. That is, does the "method of assessment afford all students the opportunity to demonstrate their competence, regardless of differences in cultural, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds" (De Vita, 2002, p. 225). Is therefore, assessing teaching in Australian schools culturally fair? It is known that English as an Additional Language (EAL) students have differences in communication; in language fluency, strong accents, "under-or-over assertive" communication and differences in non-verbal communication (Taras & Rowney, 2007). Additionally, pre-service teachers tend to reproduce the kind of teaching that they have received and observed as students (Feimen-Nemser, 2001; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Richardson, 1996). They enter field experience with a set of beliefs and assumptions about how children learn, about what curriculum should contain, and about how teaching is approached. In East Asian countries, for example, pre-service teachers are likely to perceive teaching in terms of imparting knowledge codified in textbooks, and learning in terms of absorbing, memorising and drilling this knowledge (Perry, Yee, & Conroy, 1996; Toh, 1994). These inherent beliefs and assumptions are implicit and informal; embedded in their mental image of classroom practice (Richardson, 1996). However, this style of teaching may not be well suited to the style of teaching implemented in Western countries in which more learner-centred teaching/learning approaches (e.g., peer tutoring, cooperative learning) are adopted. As MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003) assert "these students are attempting to learn course content, while also attempting to grasp the cultural and educational requirements of the dominant cultural literacy, which is not a formally taught part of their educational experience; all of this, while simultaneously retaining their own cultural literacy that is deemed redundant" (p. 133).

Not only is field experience a difficult assessment for pre-service teachers, it is also the only assessment which is not carried out by university staff. Although the assessment is pass/fail, it is the supervising teacher who assesses the student, not the university practicum co-ordinator. There is a position, a University Liaison Academic (ULA) whose role is to support both student and supervising teacher during the field experience. ULAs maintain contact with students and supervising teachers to ensure that the requirements of the field experience are being met, and offer support and mediation to both parties should it be required. Despite processes provided by universities to support students while they are in the field, a number of key questions remain unresolved. During field experience are the assessors influenced by the knowledge that a student is returning to their home country to teach? Or because

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increasingly significant numbers of international students apply for permanent residency in Australia should this influence the assessment (Gribble, 2008)? Is the assessment made purely on the pedagogy the student demonstrates or should the preservice teacher receive an unsuccessful result if the pupils cannot understand the instructions because of a strong accent? These questions have not received much research attention. This paper therefore reports on a pilot study of issues in assessing international pre-service teachers from the perspectives of lecturing staff, liaison staff and supervising classroom teachers during field experience.

Method

Participants

Three participants were interviewed in regards to ethical issues in assessing international pre-service teachers on their field experience placements. One participant was a University Liaison Academic (ULA) whose role is to liaise between field studies unit co-ordinators and the Field Experience Office staff at the university, the pre-service teacher and the supervising teacher at the placement school. The second participant was a field studies unit coordinator at the university and the third participant was a supervising teacher who had mentored an international pre-service teacher in a school. This pilot project involved staff from one university. The aim in the wider project is to include the experiences of those who are employed in other tertiary institutions as well as in other capacities.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three participants in this pilot project. Questions used were open-ended and followed a similar framework for all three participants, with variation according to their role in the field experience. For example, all interviews began with the question, "Tell me about your experiences with international students?" Following the direction of participants' thoughts, the interviews followed slightly different courses as the interviewer followed threads introduced by the participant, but questions from the interview schedule were used to refocus throughout to ensure the interviews remained on track. The interviews, which were conducted by one of the authors, ranged between 29 and 34 minutes. The interviews of the ULA and unit coordinator were conducted at the university, and the host teacher interview occurred at the participant's home. Interviews were audio taped and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews formed the basis of data analysis.

Results

Major themes derived from the data included: concern that the lack of English language proficiency hindered international students' classroom communication; that these students did not have sufficient background information on schooling in Australia to work effectively in the classroom; that school personnel did not have sufficient background information on international students to support them through the field experience; that the criteria for marking international pre-service teachers needed to be clearly stated on assessment sheets and that international students should

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not be given different assessment criteria than domestic students. Each of these points will be discussed further below.

All three participants agreed that communication difficulties hampered international pre-service teachers' ability to teach effectively:

"They're [international pre-service teachers] very willing and very keen...the language gets in the way" [ULA]

"One of the most common issues that arises...would be...things regarding their English language usage, for example that their accent is difficult to understand" [unit coordinator]

"She didn't have enough variety in her voice or in her manner. Her body language was –it was not a teacherly way" [supervising teacher]

Participants suggested that because of perceived communications problems, the international pre-service teachers had difficulty managing the class:

"Until you fix the language problem, you can't tell whether [it's] because the [pre-service] teacher's not controlling the class properly or whether it's simply the students don't understand" [ULA]

"She didn't present as a person who was an authority, somebody who was going to make this thing work. And the children didn't understand that. So she found group control difficult" [supervising teacher]

In spite of these difficulties, supervising teachers were reluctant to fail international pre-service teachers:

"Because a lot of these ESL students are very keen, very involved, do everything they're told, there is more reluctance to fail them" [ULA]

"At all times we should avoid harming them [pre-service teachers] or making the situation worse that it is...you need to know when to step in and when to let it go" [unit co-ordinator]

Supervising teachers invest a lot of time, their feelings and their thoughts into working with international students. When it became evident that a student is failing emotions such as "guilt" and "being in tears" over the decision to fail them indicates how difficult making such decisions are. Major factors influencing the decision as to whether or not to fail a student were the perceptions that international pre-service teachers did not have a strong background knowledge of schooling in Australia as well as supervising teachers' lack of understanding about visa requirements (not knowing how long international students were allowed to stay in Australia and what the impact of having to stay and repeat a practicum would mean). For example:

"I don't want to fail her because I don't know how long she's allowed to stay, so there's sort of a bit of a misunderstanding on that front" [ULA]

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And in relation to background knowledge of schooling in Australia:

“I’m sure they think that the school is going to be different, but I’m not sure they realise the extent to which those differences will manifest as issues for them on field experience” [unit coordinator]

“I’m guessing that the problems that we had that led to her failing may have been a cultural block and her life experience may have been so different that she couldn’t understand the way we were doing things, couldn’t integrate it into her understanding of schooling” [supervising teacher]

Yet, while the participants were sympathetic towards the ‘cultural shock’ international pre-service teachers may have been facing on practicum, all three felt strongly that these students should be assessed by the same criteria as domestic pre-service teachers but that the criteria needed to be more clearly identified. A factor taken into consideration was the belief that the international pre-service teacher would not be teaching in Australia but was intending to return to their home countries to teach:

“I’ve had a few people who have been saying: but she’s going back to Korea – and again that might influence whether they pass them because they think English isn’t such a big deal because they’re going back to their own country to teach” [ULA]

However :

“At the end of the day, I don’t think they should be assessed differently because I think if they choose to come to Australia and get an Australian qualification that’s their choice and here are the criteria and this is what you need to meet” [ULA]

“Well, any assessment of a student on field experience needs to happen according to the criteria sheet. So, to begin with, we need to design criteria sheets that are able to reflect that if that’s what we want to assess. If we want to build in specific assessments for students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds then it needs to be reflected for all students on the criteria sheet” [unit coordinator]

“There shouldn’t [be different assessment]. I mean, it’s a course and you have to perform the course requirements” [supervising teacher]

While the three participants were unanimous that international pre-service teachers should be evaluated against the same criteria as domestic pre-service teacher, they also felt that more should be done to support international pre-service teachers. Suggestions included providing international students with more information pre-practicum about schooling in Australia in various formats, having students self-identify early in the semester as needing additional help or providing English speaking classes if they are needed and/or placing these students with more experienced teachers who have more understanding of how to work with international pre-service teachers. One participant suggested that international pre-service teachers

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be allowed to complete their field experience in their home countries if they do not intend to teach in Australia.

Additionally, the three participants suggested that more support could be offered to teachers in better preparing them for working with international pre-service teachers. For example:

“It might be information sessions, it might be literature, it might be a CD of ideas about working with students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds, it might be students telling their stories on an audio pod kind of thing so that the teachers can listen to and understand what worked and what didn’t work”
[unit coordinator]

“What I’d like to know [is] what’s available and all that, so in those moments I can say to that student: it’s okay, this isn’t the end of the road. Here are some options you could look at. Come back to the field office and let’s talk about it...just a little bit more info on that would be good because...there’s nothing in the information pack about ESL students [going out on practicum]”
[ULA]

“I think I needed to understand more from the beginning. I needed to give her [international pre-service teacher] more direct, very precise instructions and I needed to be more focused on monitoring what she was doing” [supervising teacher]

In conclusion the unit coordinator summed up by suggesting:

“So, I think there’s probably more we can do and understanding more about what it’s like from the student’s perspective. I mean here we are talking about what it’s like from our perspective, but understanding what it’s like from the student’s perspective is also important.”

Discussion

The present pilot study presented findings from interviews involving lecturing staff, liaison staff and a supervising classroom teacher about issues in assessing international pre-service teachers during their field experience. The findings suggest concerns around a lack of international students’ English language proficiency, insufficient background information for these students on schooling in Australia, limited information for supervising teachers to support these students during field experience, and inconsistent approaches to grading students against assessment criteria.

The difficulty of separating the international students’ English language proficiency and their accent was a difficulty in assessment. Should the student fail if her English language was sufficient, but her accent was so strong that the pupils could not understand her? How does one separate poor classroom management from difficulty with language? How can EAL students know the ‘unwritten’ rules of teaching, the hidden curriculum so they can adopt Australian approaches to teaching. Should international students who are planning to return to teach in their home country, be

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assessed on teaching in their home country? Does this negate the awarding of an “Australian” degree? Is expecting international students to even undertake an assessment in an Australian school culturally fair?

It is interesting to note that the supervising teacher has the ideal teacher in mind when evaluating the student: a part of the hidden curriculum which is not articulated in criteria sheets. As it happens, one of the most important of the assessment criteria for field experience is that Australian supervising teachers expect pre-service teachers to “show initiative”. As showing initiative is often counter to the culture of the international student, does this mean that the assessment is not culturally fair? It is known that all students draw on their own educational experiences when under stress. However, international students will draw on different experiences to those of native-born Australian student which may not assist them in their field experience.

While it is espoused that the presence of international students benefits all students, as well as the community, for example, by providing an opportunity for locals to experience and expand knowledge of other cultures and languages (Han & Singh, 2007), there does not seem to be much scope for supervising teachers making optimal use of such opportunities that might be provided by international students. The emphasis is on having the pre-service teacher to complete the field experience successfully on our terms. Although much is written and spoken about the importance of including international perspectives in teaching-learning situations as being a worthy goal, in reality it may not be a priority.

It is also interesting to note the differences between the university staff and the supervising teacher with regard to measuring the student’s performance against the assessment criteria. While the university staff member maintained that all students must meet the same criteria, the supervising teacher was not as clear on this point. It seems that the university staff may ascribe to the view that if international students want to study teaching in Australia they must show the same competencies as Australian students because they chose to study here. However, they would appear to be aware that universities recruit these students, so that they feel the solution is to assist international students to better meet the criteria. There seems to be no beliefs evident in this pilot sample that the institution needs to change for international students or that assessment should be culturally fair. If the solution is to provide more help for these students, there remain questions about where such support might be obtained. Universities are currently challenged to provide quality learning and teaching for students as a result of funding cuts to the tertiary sector. Important questions remain around the sustainable provision of quality assessment that is culturally fair to the international student population.

An expansion of this pilot study to include a larger sample of participants including those with experience in other tertiary institutions is timely. Through such investigations, answers to some of the key questions raised in this paper might be found.

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