Traversing the cultural and pedagogical divide: Understanding complexities for international students completing school based professional experience.

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Abstract

This research project grew out of an identified need within teacher education programs at the Institute of Early Childhood (IEC), Macquarie University. The researchers are lecturers and coordinate Professional Experience units across the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree. They identified a continuing pattern of international students receiving low grades or failing professional experience units; particularly when they were placed in the school environment. Bourdieu theorised the importance of 'capital' as a 'power' resource for individuals (1989). He identified the role of the school system in reproducing and reinforcing the dominant cultural group within society (Bourdieu, 1973). International students have usually attended school outside of Australia and do not possess the cultural capital of the school setting they are being placed into for professional experience. Whilst they are learning to be an effective teacher they are, in parallel, learning to understand the culture of schooling within Australia.

A pilot study was conducted which aimed to identify supports and constraints for international students completing their first professional experience school placement. The research employed a social constructivist approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to explore the factors which impact on professional experience placements in school settings for international students. Social constructivism is driven by lived experiences and defines patterns of experience. The pilot study involved four phases; interviewing key stakeholders; identifying appropriate support strategies for students; applying strategies prior to and during professional experience placements; and follow up interviews to identify changes to practice.

In this paper the researchers will outline the current literature and report on the first two phases of the pilot study. Findings from key stakeholders (international students and cooperating teachers) will outline their various perspectives and identify key issues of concern. Supports required for these international students on their first school setting placement will also be discussed.

Introduction

This paper focuses on international student teachers undertaking their studies in Australia and the additional support they may need to engage successfully on their professional experience placements. Given that many international students enrolled in education degrees have completed their schooling in their home country their cultural capital about school pedagogy may not match the realities they face on professional experience placements here in Australia. This paper argues that universities have a responsibility to appropriately prepare these students. Given the limited and somewhat dated research conducted on international student teachers experience on professional placements further research is needed to investigate the supports required by these student teachers to complete professional experience placements successfully.

Participation of international students in higher education

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010c) reports an increase of 40 percent in overseas enrolments in tertiary institutions between 2003 and 2009.

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Campbell, O'Gorman, Tangen and Alford (2008) suggest that this steady increase in international students within Australian universities has necessitated a review of pedagogical practices and support systems available. Recent statistical data shows that around 24 percent of tertiary students in Australia come from abroad, and approximately 82 percent of these students are from Asian countries (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005).

Australian Universities are increasingly encouraging international students to study at their campuses (Burns, 1991; Campbell, et al., 2008). With a sharp rise, particularly evident in the number of international students enrolling in teacher education programs (Han & Singh, 2007), it is apparent that experiences in classroom settings for these students is often vastly different to those which they are familiar with from their own culture. This can have significant repercussions across all facets of their educational experiences and as such additional support may be needed. The literature indicates that many educational facilities are still coming to terms with how to best support international student teachers, though it seems that assistance is generally needed in relation to language and culture (Fan & Le, 2009; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). International students often experience difficulties in assimilating information during lectures, forming social and peer relationships, and also during professional experience placement such as those required in teacher education programs (Coley, 1999; Spooner-Lane, et al., 2009).

It is widely recognised that universities which encourage international students to undertake teacher education programs have a responsibility to provide suitable support across all aspects of study, including professional experience placements (Cruickshank, 2004; Fan & Le, 2009; Spooner-Lane, et al., 2009). While professional experience placements offer an opportunity for these student teachers to gain a greater understanding of Australian culture first hand, Farber and Armaline (1994) argue it is not a sufficient measure for them to overcome any cultural divides they may encounter. Professional experience placements are times when cultural differences may become particularly pronounced and international student teachers often find their core beliefs in regard to education and learning are challenged which can create difficulties (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This raises concerns given the importance of these placements in educational degrees (Touchon & Gwyn-Paquette, 2003).

International student teachers enter their professional placement units with educational expectations and ideals based on their cultural experiences (Fan & Le, 2009; Remennick, 2002), which may not align with the school context in which they are required to teach. Therefore opportunities need to be provided for them to become familiar with individual school contexts, pedagogical practices and social systems prior to placement. Without additional support to amass cultural capital international student teachers may not have the same opportunities and advantages as local student teachers (Burns, 1991).

Theories of practice
Bourdieu theorised the importance of 'capital' as a 'power' resource for individuals (Bourdieu, 1989). He identified the role of the school system in reproducing and reinforcing the dominant cultural group within society (1973). School success is perceived as a result of the nature of capital conveyed. This capital or 'power' is seen to surpass individual achievements (Bourdieu, 1986). International student teachers enrolled in early childhood education programs have not been part of the cultural capital of the school system throughout their childhood and later years (Burns, 1991). They may lack the understanding of the dominant culture within Australian society and can be further alienated by their own cultural practices which innately guide their responses in the school environment (Burns, 1991). International students may arrive in Australia only a short time before commencing their degree (Campbell, et al., 2008) and often

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return home during semester breaks. As such they are unable to amass cultural capital. Additionally, international students may live and socialise with people from their own cultural groups whilst attending university which reduces the opportunity for them to become familiar with local customs, social practices and language (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006).

More recently some researchers are discussing professional practice and the need to understand that each teacher has a particular practice or approach to teaching based on their values, knowledge and experiences. Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) argue that professional practice is influenced by 'saying, doing and relating'. These dimensions of practice can be defined as the:

- cultural - discursive dimension – what people say and think ('saying');
- material – economic dimension – how people interact with other people and inanimate objects ('doing'); and
- social – political dimension – how people relate to one another, including the power that one holds ('relating').

Smith, Edwards-Groves and Brennan Kemmis (2010) further conceptualise these dimensions and discuss the notion of 'relational architectures' whereby practice is seen as a "web of connectedness between multiple practice architects that impact on the daily lives of educators" (p.7). For international student teachers this means they are developing complex and diverse relationships with the school, the cooperating teacher, the school students and their university advisor. As practice is both historically and socially structured (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) the cultural background, values, knowledge and skills of international student teachers will impact on how they immerse themselves in the professional experience placement. This can also apply to the cooperating teachers and university supervisors that are supporting international students. Prior experiences, as well as the institutional setting they are teaching in will influence their professional practices.

Barkenhuizen and Feryok (2006) and Spooner-Lane and colleagues, (2009) propose that when international students enter into educational courses with a university there is a strong chance that their practices, presenting as strong preconceptions, may not align with the actual teaching contexts they experience. School systems rely on cultural capital to underpin expectations for children in the classroom setting which often remain unfamiliar to international students. This highlights the need to understand the student teacher's goals and expectations as well as the practices and outcomes expected by the university and cooperating teachers. Such knowledge will be invaluable in designing teacher education programs that can be responsive to individual student teacher needs. It is also important to examine the existing (although somewhat dated) literature surrounding supports to international student teachers during professional experience placements and strategies to assist these students to amass cultural capital for the purpose of their involvement in school settings.

Language and culture

Student teacher language proficiency has been identified as a significant factor in relation to success within professional placements (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Burns, 1991; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). While a certain level of skill is required for course entry[1], this often does not take into account the difficulties international students may encounter in both university lectures

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[1] International students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Birth to 12 years) degree with the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University need a minimum IELTS score of 7.0 overall with 6.0 Listening, 7.0 Reading, 7.0 Writing, 6.0 Speaking.

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and professional experience placements. Student teachers may be able to write at a sufficient level however their conversation and comprehension may not extend to understanding colloquialisms of university or school settings (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2010). This may impact on their teaching experiences, as well as their ability to gain the respect and confidence of the school students they are teaching. Han and Singh (2007) state that having an Australian accent greatly benefits student teachers and helps them to forge connections with their school students. Measures to help international student teachers reflect on their pronunciation and develop an understanding of the vernacular are often absent from the professional placement element of education programs offered by most universities (Spooner-Lane, et al., 2009).

Research by Givens and Bennett (2004) and Han and Singh (2007) also demonstrates that school students often query international student teachers about their ethnicity and in some cases show signs of racism. This highlights the important role that supervising teachers play in supporting student teachers, not only through guidance provided, but also in creating an environment in which the international student teachers are respected and valued. Additionally, it may be helpful to pre-empt these situations with student teachers and help them to develop responses to possible questions school students may ask about culture and ethnicity. This has benefits for student teachers as well as providing school students with a valuable opportunity to learn about other cultures. Such a focus is especially pertinent given that there are around 200 different migrant languages spoken and over 270 different ancestries identified within Australia's population of approximately 22 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a, 2010b). There is enormous potential to enrich the experiences of both student teachers and school students if cultural competencies are supported and incorporated into professional experience placements.

Pedagogical practices

Assumptions made by international student teachers relating to expected pedagogical practices may vary from the reality of Australian school contexts. It is important that teacher education programs address competency expectations. Significant difficulties can arise when student teachers are from countries that adopt more instructional approaches to teaching, rather than the preference in Australian schools for school students to be active participants in the learning process (Fan & Le, 2009). Strategies for guiding children's behaviour, for example, vary between cultures with research showing that many international student teachers struggle with the autonomy and independence children are given in the Australian school system (Fan & Le, 2009; Spooner-Lane, et al., 2009). For instance Spooner-Lane and colleagues (2009) argue that some international student teachers believed that children should not talk in class and therefore tried to stop this behaviour. To achieve success within their professional experience placement it is important that international student teachers are able to plan and conduct lessons that align with their school students learning styles. Teaching approaches that contradict the cultural expectations that the school children have become accustomed to creates issues with the credibility of the student teacher within that setting.

Supplementary support is often required to understand this concept as it is in direct contrast to the previous educational experiences of international students, and this lack of understanding may result in reduced self-belief and success rates for student teachers (Fan & Le, 2009). Additionally, adequate preparation, such as opportunities to reflect on and discuss elements of teaching such as time management and pedagogical practices, will help student teachers to earn the confidence and respect of their school students (Han & Singh, 2007). Universities need to ensure that suitable resources and support networks are provided for international student teachers.

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Supporting student teachers

Authors such as Barker, Child, Jones, Gallois, and Callan (1991), and Spooner-Lane and colleagues (2009) reinforce the importance of ensuring that student teachers are prepared both socially and culturally for professional experience placements. While these studies tend to acknowledge the impact of cultural characteristics there is little research that specifically investigates how these beliefs impact on the professional experience placements undertaken by international students (Ortlipp, 2006). Enculturation can reach beyond classroom performance during placement to affect the international student in a range of ways. This is illustrated by how many international students struggle with course content and assessment requirements, but are reluctant to seek assistance (Givens & Bennett, 2004). Such reluctance can place them at a significant disadvantage. Unwillingness to ask for help or admit difficulty is often also a result of cultural influences, particularly in countries where there is a social stigma associated with failure or seeking help (Back & Barker, 2002).

To provide successful preparation universities and academic staff must develop an understanding of the motives that drive each student teacher. This should include discussions on their perception of what it means to be successful, their personal goals, and ways they feel these can be achieved (Barker, et al., 1991; Lanlot & Pavelnko, 1995). These elements are often intertwined with the student teacher's cultural understandings and expectations and may not align with course requirements for professional placements. As such it is important that curriculum designs and pedagogical approaches within universities are responsive to any potential challenges as well as individual student teacher needs. It is also essential that all student teachers have a clear understanding of what is expected of them (Barker, et al., 1991). This should include basic information on the school, school timetables and details of their duties and responsibilities (Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). While such provisions are important for all student teachers, there is even greater benefit for those from abroad. Further studies into possible support programs for international student teachers and how these work in praxis would be valuable given the limited research available.

Socio-cultural theory presents that learning is best undertaken within social contexts where knowledge is acquired through interactions over time (Vygotsky, 1978). The issue for international student teachers is that they need to amass cultural capital in a much shorter period of time than their Australian based peers. Research demonstrates that it is advantageous for international student teachers to have opportunities to deconstruct, analyse, reflect on and rebuild their experiences (Freeman, 2002). Additional units for international student teachers could help to provide these opportunities and could assist in bridging cultural divides. Another element that helps to prepare international student teachers for professional experience placement is to provide opportunities for them to observe classroom settings and interactions before they commence their placement (Cruickshank, 2004). This helps them to gain an understanding of class room dynamics, address preconceptions and to build confidence. Involving university advisors as well as supervising teachers in any pre professional experience program is imperative and helps to ensure that everyone actively contributes to setting goals, objectives and expectations specific to the placement.

The aim of this study was to to identify supports and constraints for international students completing their first professional experience school placement. The research team conducted this research in 2010 and 2011 to explore the factors that impact on professional experience placements in school settings for international students.

Methodology

This pilot study utilised a social constructivist approach to explore the factors which impact on professional experience placements in school settings for international students. Information was obtained from international students and teachers in primary schools who have worked with international students from the IEC programs to determine what has meaning, what is *real* and what is deemed useful (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Social constructivism allows for the circumstances of the study to be described and interpreted rather than controlled for cause and effect (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is driven by lived experiences and defines patterns of experience. The aim of inquiry leads to an understanding of the specific experience for teachers and international students which are shared throughout the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994).

The four phases of this study included:

Phase 1
- Review of literature in relation to supporting international students, facilitating adult learning.
- Ethics approval.
- Recruitment of students and schools to be involved in the project.

Phase 2
- Semi structured interviews held with all participants to ascertain information needs and appropriate support structures for international students and teachers from the school settings.
- Unit coordinators met with the students several times (face to face and virtually) before they began professional experience. Topics discussed included oral and written language, intentional and spontaneous teaching, culture and expectations in Australian schools for teachers and children, including managing children's behaviour.

Phase 3
- Unit coordinators encouraged these students to complete extra visits to the school to immerse themselves in the culture of the school. Unit coordinators spoke with the schools about providing these students opportunities to see aspects of the school day (for example library, other classrooms, assembly) to help the students immerse themselves in the culture of the school.
- Unit coordinators visited the students at least twice whilst on professional experience to provide support and guidance.
- Unit coordinators met twice (virtually) with students whilst they were on professional experience.

Phase 4
- Interviews conducted with all participants after professional experience (students, teachers and unit coordinators) to identify supports and constraints to the project and changes which could occur to further enhance student learning and participation.
- Data from all interviews transcribed and analysed with the assistance of QSR Nvivo (a qualitative software program).

Participants

Two key stakeholder groups were invited to participate in this study; students and primary school teachers who support students on Professional Experience placements. Details are identified below:

1) Students: Two of the researchers were coordinating and teaching on a Professional Experience unit which is the first opportunity all students have in the undergraduate program to be placed in a school setting. Students are placed across kindergarten to year six according to availability and location. Whilst the researchers were aware of the

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students deemed as international via the unit enrolment information, it was decided that a general message at the commencement of the first lecture for semester and posted on the *Blackboard* facility (intranet for student communication specific to the unit) was provided for all students about the research to allow them to seek further information if they wished to participate. Students were advised that they could elect to be involved in the conversations and support without being involved in the research component.

Of the possible nine students researchers knew to be international students, only four chose to participate. An additional student self-identified as meeting the criteria and asked to be involved in the study. She was not deemed as an international student as she had gained Australian citizenship as a child with her parents but lived between Australia and her country of birth and did not feel confident about her English or with Australian schooling. She was included in the study. A follow up phone call was made to the remaining five international students advising them of the research. Those who chose not to be involved generally indicated that they felt additional support was not needed, or were concerned that they did not have extra time to participate. The students' cultural backgrounds included Chinese (Hong Kong; N=2), American, Argentinean and Malaysian.

2. Teachers in primary schools: Two schools were invited to be involved in the project. Both schools were in close proximity to the university (and therefore student residences) and were more likely to receive international student placements. Only two teachers (from a possible five) participated, with the remaining teachers electing not to participate due to time constraints. Both female teachers had been teaching in the NSW primary school system for 20 and 34 years respectively. Both schools were located in middle socioeconomic areas. One of the schools had a low population of school students with different cultural backgrounds, whereas the other school had a high population of students with different cultural backgrounds.

The limited number of international student teachers and schools participating in this project was in itself a form of data. Further examination of factors surrounding participation in this project will described in future publications.

Results
This paper reports initial findings from phase one and phase two of the pilot study. Findings from the pre interviews with the cooperating teachers and student teachers were addressed under the following research questions and are further described below:
1. What information do you think you need prior to starting with a school for a student practicum placement?
2. What classroom practices are you most concerned about?

Information needed prior to starting school practicum placement
The international students identified one of their needs as becoming familiar with the school system. For example one of the students noted:
> *Having a few observation days before to see how, I don't know, teachers work or, I don't know, even their routine. Because for some people it's obvious about the recess or lunch or things that they do or group activities, for me they're not obvious because I haven't done - I haven't been in the schooling here. So it's not specific information but I think it's just in general how school works (student 4, pre interview).*

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The cooperating teachers also discussed the importance of international students understanding the broader Department of Education system, including having a clear understanding of the syllabus and how to link lessons to outcomes and indicators.

The student teachers identified the need for clear expectations from the university of what the student teacher is to complete on professional experience. They noted the open ended nature of professional experience can cause anxiousness. The international students also noted the need for more support for those students who had English as a second language (concerns about being competent in both written and spoken English). Having a better understanding of the teaching approaches used in the school system was seen as important before commencing their professional experience placement. For instance one student stated:

> *Mainly how to teach the students, because before I went on my prac, all I can think is teaching is really structured and going to tell the student what to do. There's no discussion time or stuff like that. But when I actually went to the school, it's so different and I'm really scared, I didn't know what to do (student 5, pre interview).*

Classroom practices concerns

The issue of classroom practices for the international student teachers related to pedagogical approaches. They articulated the differences in pedagogy and approaches to teaching and learning between Australia and their home countries. For instance on student stated:

> *I think it's very different to my country… [we] all sit in rows and just sit down and listen and we can't really do much about it. We can't really talk between class. So every day we have a lot of homework and a lot of book work as well (student 2, pre interview).*

Another student articulated this as:

> *Because the Hong Kong structure of teaching is so strict, so you have to teach this, then teach this by that time. It's really different to Australian and that's how I was taught as well, to sit down at the table and do work as I learned. But in the Australian culture it's more playing while you're learning, as well as writing (student 1, pre interview).*

The approach to teaching was also raised during the virtual meetings with the international students prior to them commencing their block placement [but having completed one or two observation days]. The main issues these students raised were in relation to how their own school experiences differed to what they had observed. They noted how children's 'voices' were heard and allowed in the classroom in Australia as opposed to the expectation in their home country schooling of sitting in rows and listening. One student identified that the difference was between rote learning and learning through meaning (student 5, online chat 1). Another student reflected that:

> *Australia's education is very child centred and I really want to learn how to teach with that valued without punishments and having positive environment (student 1, online chat 1).*

Both cooperating teachers also discussed the importance of international students understanding how to deliver the curriculum - the pedagogy of teaching in the early years of schooling. The teachers emphasised the importance of using a more interactive and concrete based approach of teaching concepts to young children. For instance one of the teachers stated that is important for international student teachers to understand:

> *The styles that we use to teach and understand education in 2011 in Australia. We're working on a more interactive way of teaching and I think having the students understand how pedagogy is developed is important (teacher 1, pre interview).*

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During the face to face and virtual meetings international students also discussed the processes their cooperating teachers used in relation to guiding children's behaviour and identifying cues in children in terms of when they were starting to get restless. These students noted that this was a direct contrast to the punitive measures used when they were in school. For instance one student noted:

> *We just HAVE TO [their emphasis] listen to the teacher. Punishment will be given if we are not listening …. Like the teacher will beat our hand with a cane (student 5, online chat 1).*

The international student teachers also discussed the cultural differences of the status of the teacher in the classroom between their home country and Australia. They noted how the teacher is highly respected and has high status in their countries and that this had implications on how international student teachers would interact and communicate with cooperating teachers. For instance not asking questions but waiting for the teacher to communicate to them; they would feel disrespectful if they asked questions of the teacher. One student stated:

> *I will believe in teachers a lot, like our teachers are always right, they are always correct. But in the negative - so this has a negative, I would just wait for the teacher to give me the knowledge I need rather than searching the knowledge by myself (student 5, pre interview).*

This was an issue that was also raised by the cooperating teachers. The teachers felt there was a tendency for international students to be less involved with the school as a whole. For instance one of the teachers noted:

> *They're very quiet and very timid and some of them find it intimidating to come into the staffroom and tend to sort of not want to socialise* (teacher 1, pre interview).

Discussion

The preliminary findings from the pre-interviews of this pilot study highlight issues raised in previous research and literature on this topic. Three specific areas are outlined here: support for international students, theories of practice and differences in pedagogy and management.

International student teachers are traversing both cultural and pedagogical divides when completing their first school based professional experience placement. The international students in this study spoke of the need to be supported and explicitly taught the particular nuances of teaching in schools in Australia. Spooner-Lane and colleagues (2009) discuss the need for the inclusion of an extra unit for international students to help them to amass cultural capital prior to commencing their professional placement. They argue that this will assist student teachers to enhance their understanding of what Australian classroom settings look like, a point that is also supported by Han and Singh(2007). In turn, this may help to increase the student teacher's confidence, competence and ultimately their level of success. In this pilot study prior to placement the international student teachers were supported both face to face and virtually to unpack some of the issues raised by them. In this research these students were also supported further – whilst on professional experience. Initial findings highlight the benefits of the multiple support systems provided to students with one student noting that after the first online chat she felt "a lot more confident" (student 3, online chat 1). An evaluation of the support international students received in this study will be undertaken in phase 4 of this research to ascertain the success of this support. This evaluation will also consider that the success may not be limited to professional experience placements, but may also be evident in other areas of their studies.

The preliminary findings have revealed some of the different theories of practice the international student teachers and cooperating teachers have. For instance the international

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student teacher's perception of teachers as being highly regarded and respected and therefore not wanting to ask or "bother" the cooperating teacher. The teachers discussed the need for the international students not to be as reserved and to become involved in the whole school environment. It is easy to understand how these differences in praxis can create tensions and issues due to a misunderstanding of each others' expectations about how to communicate. Wisely one student noted:

> *I think what to take from it I guess is that not all international students - we don't have to completely transform our teaching to be exactly like the Australian teacher, everybody's going to bring their own experiences to the table. But it's learning what needs to be taught in Australia and knowing cultural differences and stuff like that, but incorporating it in your lessons and making it work I guess (student 3, pre interview).*

These differences in theories of practice appeared to have a significant impact on international students' interactions while placed in schools. This pilot study provided opportunities for students to reflect and articulate some of these differences. Discussions both face to face and virtually appear to have enabled students to voice concerns and access support where needed. With the act of articulating and sharing differences in theories of practice helping the international students to 'see' and then 'traverse' the cultural divide.

Data also highlighted the pedagogical and management challenges international students face as they teach in Australian contexts. Although these concerns relate to the broader issues of theories of practice they present opportunities to examine specific differences and potential concerns for teaching in an Australian context. This data highlights differences between the student's own educational experiences in comparison with Australian practice and emphasises the importance of explicitly examining appropriate practice.

Conclusion

By actively encouraging international students to complete their degrees at Australian universities each institution, as well as individual faculties, have a responsibility to provide the necessary support for their students (Spooner-Lane, et al., 2009). There needs to be the capacity to understand the goals of international student teachers, to ensure they align with the expectations required by the university and to also ensure that there is sufficient support available for student teachers to be successful. Literature suggests that additional programs that provide guidance and insights into classroom practices, learning styles, curriculum approaches, and local cultures and language will help international student teachers to amass the cultural capital necessary to be successful in their professional practice (Spooner-Lane, et al., 2009). The preliminary findings from this pilot study identified the need for discussion with international students about teaching practices and expectations in Australian schools. This data has also highlighted the need for cooperating teachers to be informed about international students' cultural values and expectations of the school setting so that miscommunication is limited and international students have the potential to complete a successful school practicum.

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