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**Intercultural understanding through a ‘similar but different’  
international teaching practicum**

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## **Intercultural understanding through a ‘similar but different’ international teaching practicum**

The ethnic and cultural diversity of many schools calls for teachers with well-developed intercultural understanding. Teacher education programs have traditionally offered international fieldwork in bi-lingual settings to challenge ethnocentric attitudes to teaching. However, an international practicum in a ‘similar but different’ education system with English as the dominant language offers a different pathway, providing opportunities to deepen intercultural understanding and global education. This study investigates the impact of a three-week international teaching practicum in the American Midwest on two groups of Brisbane-based preservice teachers in 2014 (n=9) and 2015 (n=4). Their reflective journals and reports indicate that international professional experience disrupts stereotypes and fosters global education and intercultural understanding. The paper presents key program measures to promote intercultural understanding and concludes that the benefits of international teaching in a ‘similar but different’ education system are a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity and increased readiness for the classroom.

Keywords: international practicum; teacher education; intercultural understanding; global education; cultural diversity

### **Introduction**

Cultural diversity is a feature of school education globally and has increasingly become a feature of many Australian classrooms (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Hepple et al., 2017; Thomas & Kearney, 2008). This raises many opportunities and also challenges for teacher-educators who must prepare preservice teachers through meaningful experiences to work in culturally diverse classrooms. International and Australian research has identified that developing teachers’ own intercultural capabilities is paramount as their own culture positions them to interact with students in certain ways (Malewski, Sharma & Phillion, 2012; Santoro, 2014; Tangen et al., 2017). However, what does it really

mean to teach students from a different culture from one's own? And how can preservice primary teachers develop dispositions for global education by engaging with students in culturally diverse classrooms? These questions ignite this study of a three-week international practicum conducted in 'similar but different' conditions to outer Brisbane, in a regional town in the American Midwest.

Global education draws on elements of studies in human rights, social justice, peace and sustainability to prepare students to live in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world (Dyer, 2016). Significantly, the model of global education promoted in Australian education emphasises "developing a sense of self and appreciating cultural diversity" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 2) while affirming social justice and human rights. Students are encouraged to learn to be open minded, respectful, appreciate people from other cultures, be willing to see the world from different perspectives and take action for change (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Holden & Hicks, 2007). These guidelines align with Australian goals of education which note that increased global integration and mobility creates preconditions for global education (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7) and Standard 1.3 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers to *Know students and how they learn: Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017). Global education is delivered through the general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, especially intercultural understanding, where students learn to 'value and view critically their own cultural perspectives and practices and those of others through their interactions with people, texts and contexts across the curriculum' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013, p. 113). As such, building teachers' own dispositions for global

education and intercultural capacity through domestic or international opportunities is essential to developing culturally responsive teachers.

Preservice teachers in Australia draw from white, middle class and monolingual backgrounds (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) and may have little idea of how their encultured beliefs and values shape their practice (Hepple et al., 2017; Santoro & Major, 2012). The challenge for teacher educators is to address the potential mismatch between many preservice teachers' own cultural backgrounds and the expectations of the profession to respond to students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (AITSL, 2017, Standard 1.3) through supervised teaching experience. Challenging deficit beliefs about what diverse students bring to the classroom and increasing teachers' own cultural awareness is critically important to working in culturally diverse classrooms (Dantas, 2007; Thomas & Kearney, 2008).

In this paper, I argue that a short-term international practicum in a 'similar but different' English speaking setting has the potential to develop empathetic understandings of diversity, enhance classroom readiness and a disposition for global education. Acknowledging the gap in Australian research into the benefits of an international experience (Santoro & Major, 2012; Santoro, 2014), this paper investigates the outcomes of an international practicum in the USA dubbed the Queensland State University (QSU) program (pseudonym used). First, I investigate current Australian perspectives on preservice teachers' cultural understanding. Second, drawing on Wilson (1993) I theorise teachers' knowledge in international student teaching and explore the program structure and data. Third, following inductive, thematic data analysis, the five categories of preconceptions, professional experience, cultural experience, personal

experience and program structure are discussed. I conclude by outlining key measures to promote intercultural understanding and capitalise on the experience.

### **Cultural understanding and professional experience**

The success and perceived value of teacher education programs hinge to a large extent on preservice teachers' perceptions of their professional experiences during their course of study (Mayer et al., 2015). Professional experiences in culturally diverse schools are contingent on the availability of places and may be difficult to arrange in some regional and outer metropolitan schools. The Australian Government's report on initial teacher education, *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG], 2014), found that beginning teachers were insufficiently prepared 'to address diverse student learning needs and work with cultural and community complexities' (TEMAG, 2014, p. 20) and called for better integration of theory and practice with real opportunities to integrate theory with practice. A key finding of the *Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education: Final Report [SETE]* (Mayer et al., 2015) was that professional experience was core to learning teaching and further highlighted the need to prepare teachers to teach in culturally diverse schools. Significantly, in the Victorian and Queensland-based teacher education programs examined for *SETE*, graduate teachers reported being less well prepared and less effective teaching culturally, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse learners and less effective in diverse classrooms.

Moreover, it appears that graduate teachers have not properly understood what it means to teach in culturally diverse classrooms. *SETE* reports that 'being prepared for diversity was often couched in terms of catering for diverse learning styles, not in relation to teaching culturally, economically diverse students' (Mayer et al., 2015, p. 146). Graduate teachers were reportedly challenged by working with students who live

in poverty or have different values and beliefs about education; further, their relationships with the community were affected by class issues and changing demographics. This finding indicates a possible misunderstanding of Standard 1.3 (AITSL, 2017) as catering for diverse learning styles rather than teaching to address cultural or socioeconomic differences. In reference to diversity in US classrooms, Gay maintains that culturally responsive teaching 'is a means for unleashing the higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their academic and psychosocial abilities' (2010, p. 21). A short international practicum in a 'similar but different' culture can provide unique opportunities to develop a culturally responsive teaching approach.

The significance of the international practicum itself cannot be underestimated. In researching a study-abroad partnership between an Australian university and a Midwestern university in the United States, Salmona, Partlo, Kaczynski, and Leonard (2015) observe that although most preservice teachers are exposed to cultural perspectives in course work, regionally-centred teaching experience tends to result in ethnocentric teaching practice when teaching their own class. They argue that acculturation experiences through international field experience provide a unique opportunity to increase professional growth. Similarly, in their study of a 22-day practicum for Australian preservice teachers in South Africa, Parr and Chan (2015, p. 50) argue for a reflexive approach, finding it promoted 'dialogic identity work' and educational 'becoming'. Referring to teacher education in Europe, Dooly and Villanueva contend that intercultural education is most effective when theory is grounded in practical experience and reflection in order to bring about change, for being 'made aware of cultures (own and others) ... will help them interpret and understand others' (2006, p. 226). They show that teacher education combining theory with

intercultural practice has a potentially long-term effect, raising awareness of diversity and shaping a deeper professionalism based on understanding and respect.

### **Theorising international professional experience**

The value of cross-cultural experiences to build global citizenship and intercultural awareness is not new (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001; Wilson, 1993). Going back to the 1980s, Wilson (1993) theorised that international experience makes a powerful contribution to an individual's knowledge and perception of the world in two general categories: (a) gaining a global perspective, and (b) developing self and relationships. Within these categories, Wilson classifies the many benefits from cross-cultural experiences into four areas: (1) *substantive knowledge* referring to global perspectives, especially knowledge of other cultures, awareness of world issues, global dynamics and human choices; (2) *perceptual understanding* referring to open-mindedness, resistance to stereotyping and empathetic understanding of others; (3) *personal growth* in relation to acceptance of self, increased maturity, responsibility and independence; and (4) *interpersonal connections* described as the ability to build interpersonal relationships with people in the host country and on returning home. Salmona et al. (2015) argue that local and global student teaching experiences support transformational and socio-cultural learning of the student as teacher to self-actualisation of teacher as professional.

While Wilson's (1993) model explores the impact of a cross-cultural experience on global perspectives and teacher professional learning, it offers less scope to consider attitudes to learning and communication put forward by more recent models of intercultural competence (e.g., Bennett, 2004; Deardorff, 2007). However, Wilson's framing concepts of global perspectives, perceptions of self and developing



interpersonal relationships through exposure to a different culture were the focus of the QSU program. Adapted for this study, Wilson (1993) is an insightful framework to interpret the impact of an international practicum in 'similar but different' settings to create dispositions for global education and professional purpose and relationships (see Figure 1). [Figure 1 here]

In Figure 1, *Dispositions for global education* refers to increased knowledge of cultures, acknowledging and addressing stereotypes and personal growth in accepting oneself and others. It is broader than Wilson's focus on 'gaining a global perspective', describing a reflective, global mentality incorporating knowledge of self, other cultures and social justice. *Professional purpose and relationships* interrelates 'new' cultural knowledge, building interpersonal relationships, maturity and independence with renewed purpose for teaching. Different but related to Wilson's original emphasis on 'developing self and relationships', it embraces substantive knowledge of other cultures, interpersonal relationships and self-awareness as professional knowledge for teaching.

The impact of an international practicum on preservice teachers' intercultural understanding in a variety of settings has been widely documented (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Chinnappan, McKenzie, & Fitzsimmons, 2013; Cushner, 2007; Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Parr & Chan, 2015; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Richardson & Munday, 2013; Salmona et al., 2015; Santoro & Major, 2012; Tangen et al., 2017; Willard-Holt, 2001; Yang, 2011). While intercultural understanding and global education impacts preservice teachers in personal and professional ways (Cushner, 2007; Parr & Chan, 2015; Willard-Holt, 2001), the importance of the lived experience is claimed to be the critical component in developing a meaningful understanding of others and of one's own place in an interconnected world (Cushner, 2007). These understandings are especially important in programs where preservice teachers

encounter significant linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural differences (Chinnappan, et al., 2013; Hepple, et al., 2017; Santoro & Major, 2012; Willard-Holt, 2001; Yang, 2011). However, the research from an Australian perspective into intercultural understanding and dispositions for global education in ‘similar but different’ English-speaking settings is limited.

This paper reports on the experiences of primary preservice teachers at a metropolitan university in Brisbane, Australia, who participated in a three-week practicum arranged through a reciprocal partnership with a State university in the American Midwest. As program coordinator of the QSU program from 2013 to 2015, I initiated the study to investigate its outcomes as a worthwhile professional experience; while primary schools in Australia and elementary schools in the American Midwest have different curricula and school structures, they share the same Western heritage and English is the dominant language. Below, I explore the structure of the program, participants and key themes arising from the data collected.

### **The QSU program – background and structure**

The QSU program commenced in 2010 and aimed to give third and fourth year primary preservice teachers exposure to cultural diversity in the US education system. Funded in part by the participants and subsidised by the university, it attracted keen interest with five to nine participants each year. Although the program was initially extra-curricular, in 2015 it was offered for credit as an independent study. The participants travelled in a group to the USA with an Australian academic and were accommodated with homestay families. All were placed by the US academic with experienced mentors in one elementary school for ten days of supervised teaching.

The structure of the program, preparation prior to departure and close collaboration and support provided by the Australian and US academics were important

factors in the delivery of its intercultural objectives. Initially seen as an opportunity for international travel, accountability was limited to an oral presentation and report. In research on Australian programs in India and Korea, Santoro and Major (2012) argue that culturally responsive international programs have the potential to be transformative if there is an accompanying academic program to make sense of the experience. In 2013, the QSU program was substantially revised to promote professional knowledge, reflection and reporting. At two pre-departure briefings participants were introduced to program expectations and key information about Midwestern culture, geography and climate, details of the host school and expectations of family life in a homestay. They commenced email contact with host families 3–4 weeks prior to departure. To aid reflection, the revised program included a pre-departure questionnaire, weekly prompts for a one-page diary reflection, a task sheet and marking rubric for the final multimodal presentation, mentor report on professional progress and a final report and evaluation. Past experience showed that preservice teachers became deeply emotionally engaged in the experience. Additional reflection and reporting meant they had an avenue to process and respond to the experience professionally as well as emotionally, thereby deepening professional learning.

The program was scheduled in the last week of November when Thanksgiving is celebrated and the first two weeks of December. In the first week, the preservice teachers attended an orientation program organised by the partner university, visited the host elementary school, attended family Thanksgiving celebrations and participated in other local cultural and sporting events such as Christmas lights, a university ice hockey or basketball game, and Black Friday shopping. Supervised teaching commenced in the second week. The Australian academic departed two days later, but participants were required to maintain regular email contact. Supervised teaching included observations,

small group and whole class teaching, supported by the US academic who held regular in-school meetings and assessed the multimodal presentations.

### **Method and data collection**

Following ethical approval for the study, a total of thirteen preservice teachers (n=13) volunteered to be part of the research. In 2014, all participants (n=9, 7 females and 2 males) agreed, while in 2015, four (all female) of the six participants volunteered. All participants were Caucasian native English speakers, residing in the outer Brisbane area. None were bilingual and only three had previously travelled abroad. Three of the 2015 participants undertook the practicum for credit by undertaking extra reading and assessment on intercultural understanding and global education. All participants had completed local placements and were well-versed in professional reflection on teaching practice. They were briefed that the aim of the research was to explore the intercultural learning gained in a 'similar but different' school setting, and to document their personal and professional learning.

A range of perspectives was gathered from participants' responses in pre-departure questionnaires (P), three weekly journals (W1 – Week 1 journal, W2 – Week 2 journal, W3 – Week 3 journal) and final reports (FR). Each of these written sources of data was named and coded using pseudonyms for each participant and the data source (e.g., Samuel, W1). Students responded to one or two teaching journal prompts each week addressing the areas of 1) Teaching (e.g., *Compare the daily schedule at Martin Luther King School to that in a school in Australia; Compare and contrast teaching practices*); 2) Events (e.g., *Explain an event or experience that brought you out of your comfort zone*); 3) Changes in You (e.g., *I know that I am changing as a result of my experience because...; How have your views of your own country and culture*

*changed?*). Students were guided to choose a prompt/s and submit a one page response using the format of Description-Interpretation-Evaluation (D-I-E) (Paige, Cohen, Koppler, Chi & Lassegard, 2006). A sixty-minute focus group (FG) (audio-recorded and transcribed) was held six weeks after the 2014 experience with six of the nine participants and the Australian academic, Karen, who had accompanied the participants. Questions at the Focus Group probed the structure of the program, cultural diversity and long-term outcomes: *How important was it for your supervising teachers to deal with diversity in their classroom in terms of culture? How has the three-week experience in the United States prepared you for teaching in your fourth year and beyond?*

Although the 2014 program was extra-curricular, the participants' responses were equally detailed compared with the 2015 data, so both years are considered as one data set. Qualitative thematic data analysis was conducted to elicit recurrent themes in the data. Then, through comparison and analysis, patterns were identified and the themes were grouped to form categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The five categories are (1) preconceptions, (2) professional experience, (3) cultural experience, (4) personal experience, and (5) program structure (see Table 1).

[Table 1 near here]

## **Findings**

Table 1 summarises the categories and themes that emerged from the data. While the categories bear resemblance to findings by Willard-Holt (2001) and Pence and Macgillivray (2008), in this study, it appears that language was key to precipitating intercultural understanding and global education. Based on Wilson (1993), each category is discussed in relation to the adapted model of the impact of an international professional experience described in Figure 1 above.

### ***(I) Preconceptions***

Two briefings were held, the first six weeks before departure and the second two weeks before travel. A pre-departure questionnaire was completed in the second briefing to provide a foundation for future professional reflection. The participants were concerned about teaching in a ‘foreign’ classroom (Maurice, P), new content such as teaching imperial measurement (Sam, P), teaching with technology (Jenny, P) and teaching from a curriculum manual (Lisa, P). They were curious about the co-teaching model (Sam, P; Mary, P), acknowledged the need to keep an open mind (Terri, P) and worried about not having their own teaching resources (Carrie, P). Karen, the accompanying Australian academic noted the importance of these briefings, “I found these guys so responsible for themselves, so engaged in the experience, all for the right reasons which I don’t know ...[is] because of the conversations we had before” (Karen, FG, p. 1).

Drawing on Wilson’s (1993) categories of *substantive knowledge* and *perceptual understanding*, initiating cultural self-awareness is the foundation to developing intercultural understanding. With little *substantive knowledge* of American culture, even at this early stage the participants were aware cultural norms (Maurice, P; Elle, P) and language, especially Australian slang (Donna, P), would be a significant point of difference. They expressed *perceptual understanding* that entering another culture would also impact on teaching: ‘The experience of being the “other” culture instead of the dominant culture may also be challenging for a beginning teacher’ (Mary, P). In addition, they raised travel concerns including worrying about US customs (Jennie, P), possible homesickness (Rita, P; Maurice, P; Mary, P), fitting into the homestay family (Rita, P), being prepared for the extremely cold weather (Jennie, P) and nervousness about living in a stranger’s house (Lisa, P). These professional and personal concerns

refer to *interpersonal connections* and *personal growth* (Wilson, 1993) which proved to be the foundation for the experiences to follow.

## ***(2) Professional experience***

### *Professional knowledge*

Contributing to the first general category of dispositions for global education (see Figure 1), Wilson (1993) describes *Substantive knowledge* for teaching in international experience as knowledge of world issues and other cultures. The participants highlighted the issue of the difference between Australian and US academic standards. Carrie commented: 'I was shocked to find some of them [Year 1] working are actually working [at] a higher academic level than a number of the grade 3 students that I had.... While I have had to tie a lot of shoe laces, these students have blown me away with their ability to learn independently and their work ethic' (Carrie, W2). Illustrating an ethnocentric viewpoint, Carrie seemed to be in denial that there could be such a difference in educational standards, indicating gaps in her *substantive knowledge* of US academic standards. One of the biggest differences was the use of a curriculum manual which provided details of content, teaching resources and what the teacher should say. Carrie noted that 'the teaching and lessons are far more flexible and in depth in Australia' (Carrie, W2). However, others saw its potential value – Kate thought that a maths curriculum book 'that is more flexible' (Kate, W2) would be useful and Mary felt that although it 'seems robotic' it was still possible to deliver engaging lessons (Mary, W2). Curriculum manuals offered greater support for students needing differentiation, gave the teacher flexibility and were similar to the Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) materials used in Queensland: 'In spite of this, it comes down to how you as the teacher interpret and use these documents' (Maurice, W3). These participants were alert

to their own teacher professional agency (Campbell, 2012), and *perceptual understanding* (Wilson, 1993) in being open-minded to different approaches.

Similarly, the participants were open to learning how to improve outcomes for students of diverse abilities and managing student behaviour. Consistent with *substantive knowledge* of other cultures, the use of teaching strategies such as the WIN (What I Need) literacy and numeracy support teaching strategy was credited with supporting the high levels of reading. ‘WIN is a very supportive time in the daily program’ (Jennie, W3) that helped the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. ‘This takes away the embarrassment of “being the slow kid” or “being the kid who can’t read” ’ (Jennie, W3). Furthermore, the school had consistent behaviour management strategies that supported learning such that the behaviour was ‘far milder’ than what they were used to (Kate, W2). Behaviour management was based on intrinsic rewards and mutual respect for teacher and students (Mary, W2, W3); it was based on ‘structured routines and procedures’ (Maurice, FR) and took so little time, ‘the class worked through the day like a well-oiled machine’ (Jennie, FR). Through *interpersonal connections* (Wilson, 1993) with strong mentors, participants experienced professional growth from seeing different behaviour management and inclusive teaching strategies.

Preservice teachers’ professional knowledge was aided by the quality and professionalism of their mentors who showed ‘a whole new way to approach difficult children’ (Mary, W3) and modelled professionalism: ‘The teachers, I have found appear to be very professional and proud in their classrooms, which makes me reflect and think “Yes, this is what I want to do” ’ (Maurice, FR). Participants were introduced to the co-teaching model (Bacharach, Heck & Dahlberg, 2010) which offers several strategies including team teaching where two teachers teach the class at the same time. The co-teaching model of mentoring preservice teachers offered many benefits as a ‘supportive



and useful way to learn' and reduced anxiety (Jennie, W2). Experiencing teacher professionalism and mentoring in a different cultural context reflects Wilson's (1993) categories of *substantive knowledge*, *perceptual understanding* and *interpersonal connections*, furthering dispositions for global education and professional purpose.

### *Language*

It was the preservice teachers' use of language that demonstrated the clearest evidence of new intercultural awareness and deeper knowledge of what it actually meant to experience cultural diversity. Demonstrating Wilson's (1993) categories of *substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding*, from early on in the program many referred to the challenge of language, with several students (Terri, W1; Marion, W3; Donna, W2; Maurice, W1) noting Australian colloquialisms and phrases such as 'hat meant beanie, pop meant soda, trash can meant bin' (Terri, FR). For the first time, they became aware that language is pivotal to communication, especially when teaching in a different culture. Maurice described the topic of language in his Week 1 Journal thus:

'G'day mate, how you goin'?' ... This is a common Australian phrase which is a stereotype of Australians. It was quite funny, my first day in the classroom my mentor teacher introduced me to her fellow third grade teachers and automatically I said 'G'day nice to meet you'. Straight away I recognised that I had this, I laughed and said 'Hi'. (Maurice, W1)

Maurice noted these phrases were 'so natural that it becomes automatic and I don't even notice myself saying them until now where I have stepped into a completely new culture and it becomes apparent'. He was also now far more conscious that people might not understand 'when I say "how you going" but I tend to rephrase myself and say "how are you doing?" this seems to be a more common phrase in America when asking someone how they are' (Maurice, W1). By Week 2, Donna had also become

aware that the way she spoke could be completely misunderstood and lead to confusion:

I have also noticed that Australian slang or the way I say certain phrases can be misinterpreted or mean something completely different. For example I used the word 'cruisy', which means 'laidback' or 'flexible' during a conversation with my host mum. She was confused because she had never heard that word before.

(Donna, W2)

Increased *substantive knowledge* and heightened *perceptual understanding* was revealed in Donna's awareness that cultural differences due to language caused confusion and distanced her from the host culture. Her Week 2 journal describes the 'slight language barrier' and acknowledged, 'This experience has given me the opportunity to further develop my cultural knowledge of America, which I believe is facilitating my development of appreciation for the similarities and differences in cultures' (Donna, W2).

However, reflecting *perceptual understanding*, Marion reported the full impact of how language differences could adversely affect the quality of teaching was felt when teaching phonics:

... by far the biggest challenge I have faced this week is teaching phonics to Kindergarten children. In particular, the pronunciation of /o/ and /a/. There has been many occasions this week while I was taking reading groups and assisting students to sound out their words that the students became more confused by my Australian pronunciation of the vowels. I did not think of this as a challenge before I left Australia. I knew there would be a little bit of a language barrier with the different accents and terminology for certain objects, however, I did not think of teaching phonics as something that I would struggle with. (Marion, W2)

In the same week, she received news of a death in her extended family in Brisbane which exacerbated her sense of cultural dislocation, noting that 'this emotional stress and pressure has contributed with my frustration and struggle with teaching phonics'.

Indicating *personal growth* (Wilson, 1993), the incident led to deeper personal insights and she reported that she had ‘learnt what it means to keep my private life away from my teacher life – especially in a setting where I really have to concentrate on my pronunciation’ (Marion, W2). Significantly, indicating *perceptual understanding*, this incident resulted in a deeper understanding of what it actually meant to teach for cultural diversity:

I now also have a much greater understanding for students who have moved from another country who might one day be in my classroom. I think that the experience of speaking differently to everyone else in the room as made me realise how much of a struggle it is for children to start school in a new country. I know how hard it is for me and I am still speaking the same language as everyone else, I can’t imagine what it is like for students who have English as an additional language. (Marion, W2)

This was a critical incident in Marion’s development as a teacher as she was linking her theoretical knowledge of university study on teaching students for cultural diversity with current lived experience. Her struggles with language continued in Week 3 when she realised they did not understand her when she said, ‘Your rubbish missed the bin’ (Marion, W3). She reports that she repeated herself and ‘began to get a little bit cranky at the student. It took me a while to realise what I had said made no sense to this student’ (Marion, W3). Drawing on *perceptual understanding* and *personal growth* (Wilson, 1993), these incidents reveal an unexpected level of cultural dissonance and frustration, even though English was a shared language. Samuel referred to the difficulties of fitting into a ‘semi-foreign culture’, asserting it was ‘great practice for dealing with students that require differentiation. Every teacher should be put in a foreign culture so they have experience with this’ (Samuel, FR). These critical incidents with language reinforced professional purpose for teaching.

### *Global education*

Dispositions for global education (see Figure 1) developed through knowledge of the host culture were also generated through the QSU program. The 2014 cohort experienced the aftermath of the Ferguson race riots when African Americans across the country protested in large groups against the police killing of a black youth in Ferguson, Missouri. A protest group comprising African American students demonstrating at the university was witnessed by Lisa who diarised, 'I felt immediately uncomfortable, maybe even afraid, as it is a situation I had not experienced before' (Lisa, W1). This confronting incident caused her to examine her own views on peaceful protest. The riots were on the news and it was discussed quite extensively by her host family, who felt the riots were destroying businesses, and caused her to relate this incident to Australian protests:

I found myself agreeing with what they were saying and trying to think of any major recent riots that have occurred in Australia. My only recollection was the Cronulla riots and whilst this was race-based it was not with Indigenous Australians.

I felt the protesters at the [US uni] were doing it in a peaceful manner and were able to get their message across without causing any damage to property or people. If I was a member of the host culture with dominant cultural values, I think I would be respectful towards the protest as it was peaceful. If the situation had escalated into violence, I am not sure if my opinion would still be the same. I can understand why they are protesting yet feel the use of violence is not acceptable. (Lisa, W2)

Lisa evidences a disposition for global education as she processed this event as part of her own understanding of Australian history causing her to consider her own values, the views of her hosts and also to develop deeper empathetic understandings of the views of the dominant culture. By framing it as a 'peaceful protest' she was able to reconcile it with previously held views but reveals tension between new experiences and deeply

held attitudes. Rather, drawing on Wilson's (1993) *substantive knowledge* of other cultures and *perceptual understanding* to empathise with her hosts, the incident heightened sensitivity to race relations and social justice issues (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). In the Focus Group, Samuel commented that the university protest was 'really sobering' and acknowledged his new awareness of the difficulties posed by cultural diversity: 'It's all these cultures coming together and clashing a lot and you have to figure out a way to incorporate them and have them all work side by side without it evolving into something as bad as Ferguson' (Samuel, FG, p. 4). While this short experience raised awareness of discrimination and race-related issues it is unclear whether attitudes had really changed.

The experience of the overseas placement sensitised participants to the cultural and socioeconomic diversity which presented in their classroom (*substantive knowledge*). However, highlighting a gap in their preparation, participants had not expected to encounter different ethnicities in the classroom: 'I thought that it would be a bit more, like you said homogeneous, I wasn't expecting the diversity.... Like I have never been in a classroom with Arab students' (Jennie, FG, p. 5). Karen corroborated that in pre-departure briefings 'we sort of thought about cultural diversity of going to another country but not then the cultural diversity inside that cultural diversity' (Karen, FG, p. 5). Mary explained that she had explored both cultural and socioeconomic diversity in the classroom with her mentor:

... she said normally I have lots of refugee children and so we had those conversations about that and she just said that they do get lots of support so and you can see the support within the school, not just even just cultural diversity but socio-economic diversity within, and that I think with [the school] is one of the biggest diversity things that you will see is the socio-economic handling ... (Mary, FG, p. 6)

Some students were provided with free or subsidised school lunches and some benefitted from a support program of easy to prepare 'back pack' food and a toy to take home over the weekend. Such social welfare initiatives that were facilitated by the school were new to the participants: 'I thought it was good, being aware of the student's situation and acting upon it not just leaving it ...' (Nicky, FG, p. 7). From a global education perspective (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), these experiences drew on *substantive knowledge* and *perceptual understanding* (Wilson, 1993) to draw attention to cultural diversity and take action on social justice issues.

Other incidents which created dispositions for global education and a diversity of cultural viewpoints arose from experiences with hunting. Rita, a vegetarian, recorded in Week 1 that she understood that hunting was a sport passed down through the generations, although, 'It was a bit of a shock when I saw the taxidermied animals hanging from the wall/ceiling and collection of crossbows and guns' (Rita, W1). As an animal lover, hunting was Terri's 'biggest challenge' (FR), reinforced when hunting emerged as part of her teaching:

Whilst I was on my practicum I noticed lots of students writing about hunting in their personal narratives. This taught me to accept that it is part of people's lives and that it isn't up to me to judge them and say it's wrong. I could potentially have students in my future classes that have things that their families and they do which I don't agree with but it just shows that all families do different things and I need to have an open mind. (Terri, FR)

It taught her about cultural differences and normalising of cultural viewpoints and values antithetical to her own. Other cultural knowledge that increased the disposition for global education was awareness that 'This culture is very religious' (Terri, W1), demonstrated by saying grace before each meal and regular attendance at church (Kate, W1, FR). Understanding the significance of hunting and religious practice in a 'similar

by different' culture widened their *substantive knowledge, personal growth* and *interpersonal connections* (Wilson, 1993) by challenging stereotypes.

### ***(3) Cultural experience***

The experience of culture in a 'similar but different' setting raised opportunities and obstacles to intercultural understanding. While the international practicum widened participants' cultural experience of important events and traditions, there were notable contradictions in their experience of food which challenged both an emerging disposition for global education and revitalised professional purpose (see Figure 1).

Opportunities in *substantive knowledge* and *perceptual understanding* (Wilson, 1993) in cultural experience derived from preservice teachers' participation in family traditions associated with Thanksgiving, especially the festive food and bonding between family members and others. They commented that Thanksgiving alerted them to the value of family relationships (Donna, W2) 'not so different from my own family' (Elle, FR) and resonated with Christmas traditions such as the beautiful Christmas lights (Terri, W1) and a real Christmas tree (Mary, W3).

However, the participants experienced significant cultural dissonance around the food. Most tried the new food but some did not like it (Marion, W1). Donna (W2) commented it was quite sweet, and due to the strangeness around how food was prepared and stored, Mary found herself 'craving for a normal Meat and three Veg meal!' (Mary, W3). Food was also the site of cultural learning and teaching as part of supervised teaching. Marion recounted a critical teaching experience which crystallised her discomfort:

There was one other time this week when I felt totally out of my comfort zone. This was when I shared vegemite with my class. I read them the story 'Possum Magic' which talks about different foods in Australia. I then explained how most

children in Australia would have vegemite on toast for breakfast each morning or have a vegemite sandwich every day for lunch. I was not expecting them to like it, but I explained how I would appreciate everyone trying it.... However, one student disliked it so much that he threw up all over the classroom floor. I did not know what to do. After we made sure that the student was ok, my mentor teacher and I just laughed and laughed. The cleaner also said it was the funniest puking story he had ever had to attend to.... I am not in a hurry to give vegemite to any more Americans. (Marion, W3)

Marion combined teaching about Australian culture and food through an iconic Australian text, *Possum Magic*, with tasting it to provide students with a new intercultural experience. Building on *interpersonal connections* (Wilson, 1993) with a supportive mentor, Marion took steps towards teaching intercultural understanding with somewhat unforeseen outcomes, causing her to reconsider the purpose of the activity.

#### ***(4) Personal experience***

An international practicum creates many opportunities for *personal growth* (Wilson, 1993), maturity, increased self-confidence and to develop life skills. In line with program goals, Karen observed a proactive approach, “even though some of you had rough patches all I saw was the initiative to deal with those and keep going which is, you know what we wanted you to do” (Karen, FG, p. 1). These new skills were significant in contributing to the second general category (see Figure 1) of Professional purpose and relationships. Lisa (W3) reported that although she was confident to meet new people, ‘after this experience I feel my confidence has grown even more. Maybe this was due to being a foreigner, with a very different accent, and people wanting to hear us talk!’ Ellie (W1) expressed pride in the ‘small steps’ towards independence while Jennie noted becoming more self-sufficient would influence her future personal and professional life:



I know I am changing as a result of my experiences so far because I can see myself becoming more self-sufficient. I am learning to do my own cooking with limited ingredients and even more limited experience. I feel that even in the short five action-packed days I have been in America, I am growing as a person. I believe this exchange practicum experience will help me in my future professional career when I leave my home in Australia with my parents and move to my first paid teaching position. When that time does come, I will bring with me my recently new-found skills of independence and of resourcefulness. (Jennie, W1)

Personal growth also related to the pressure to conform to new cultural situations and be the 'gracious guest' by not offending the host family (Mary, W1), refusing to voice personal feelings on hunting (Rita, W1), and attending church and saying grace with the host family (Kate, W1; Donna, W1). One student, Carrie, experienced quite dramatic personal growth during this time, which she attributed to the experience of attending church with her host family:

This experience has made me pause and reflect not only on my development as a teacher, but also on my personal beliefs and my goals, both personally and professionally.... As a result of this program, I've jumped on the 'be a better person' wagon and am really excited by the prospect of a life in which I contribute something rather than just a life for the sake of it. (Carrie, FR)

The experience of a new culture had opened her eyes to new and 'better' ways of living, prompting a strong sense of professional purpose and self. It speaks to an attitudinal change in oneself and reflective thinking related to *perceptual understanding* and *personal growth* (Wilson, 1993).

##### **(5) Program structure**

In their evaluations of the QSU program, the participants provided feedback on the orientation, homestay, length of program and emotional support to refine future programs. Participants were very complimentary but would have liked an additional

week of teaching as it was only in the second week that they really began to bond with the students (Samuel, FR; Marion, FR). Special mention was made of the support provided in 2014 by Karen, the Australian academic (Carrie, FR), and the need to bring forward the multi-modal presentation to alleviate stress and allow time to say goodbye to the host teachers and students (Maurice, FR; Rita, FR). The participants also wanted more time to interact with students at the host university (Jennie, FR; Donna, FR). Although some experienced problems settling into their homestay (Nicky, W1; Ellie, W2), Maurice (FR) noted, 'Staying with a homestay family has also provided us with an excellent opportunity to be enriched in the culture and different cultural experiences' and Terri became quite attached: 'I have thoroughly enjoyed my time with my homestay family. They have felt just like family to me and I'm going to miss them very much' (Terri, W3). These comments exemplify the *interpersonal connections* in Wilson's model (1993) where the international practicum established deep connections with the host culture, ranging from homestay parents, to mentors and students.

## **Discussion**

The QSU program was supported by tools for professional and personal reflection which served as a mechanism for preservice teachers to process their travel and homestay experiences as well as discuss their teaching experience. By their own admission, the preservice teachers experienced cultural dissonance and discomfort but also moments of genuine insight and understanding of global education. There was greater sensitivity to cultural differences, diversity and inclusive practice as a result of the overseas placement. Moreover, their teaching experiences challenged preconceptions of American classrooms as being culturally and socioeconomically homogenous. Outside the classroom, stereotypes were also disrupted as students gained a more nuanced understanding of the Midwest as part of the American culture, where

hunting is both a leisure activity and prized way of life along with daily religious practice. Although they had studied cultural diversity and inclusion as part of their own teacher education, it was not until they had experienced it themselves that this professional and personal learning was realised. The actualisation of intercultural understanding as part of preservice teachers' knowledge was a powerful outcome.

Surprisingly, the English language differences or 'language barrier' (Donna, W2; Marion W2) were pivotal in alerting preservice teachers to the need to be culturally sensitive and proactive. As Marion explained,

When I arrive back in Australia and complete the practicums in my final year at university and then begin my career in 2017, I will be more understanding of the difficulty students with English as an additional language or dialect are faced with. I will also aim to make more of an effort to assist these students with their education and make sure they are receiving the support and the services they need to be as successful as possible, not only academically, but socially as well.  
(Marion, FR)

Unlike local placements, the international practicum had led to a more profound and nuanced understanding of cultural difference because preservice teachers were immersed in a 'semi-foreign culture' (Samuel, FR). Through their experience of teaching and living in the community, there was a genuine recognition of their own ethnocentric views. In light of Wilson's model (1993) it is evident that they gained a disposition for global education through *substantive knowledge* of the culture, teaching practice, cultural diversity and socioeconomic disadvantage. The knowledge gained through professional and cultural experience also evidenced *perceptual understanding* demonstrated through new awareness and empathetic understanding of diversity. They experienced *personal growth* through independence, self-confidence, a deeper sense of personal values and self-worth and in one case, a searching for a 'better self' (Carrie,

W3). New *interpersonal connections* were also generated with mentors, homestay parents and students, showing that even a short international practicum can generate professional purpose and personal maturity.

The findings can also be considered in relation to models of intercultural competence which explore attitudes to learning and communication across cultural boundaries (Bennett, 2004; Deardorff, 2007). Bennett (2004) maintains that cross-cultural experience is ‘constructed’ and describes six stages of intercultural competence moving from ethnocentrism to ‘ethnorelativism’ through denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and integration. It appears the participants moved from *denial* of cultural difference (‘teachers do what teachers do all over the world you know’ (May, FG, p.3) to *defense* against cultural difference (exemplified by Marion’s reluctance to introduce US students to Vegemite) to *minimisation* (‘all families do different things’ Terri, FR). The short duration afforded little opportunity to show acceptance or integration and participants remained largely ethnocentric, prioritising their own culture as ‘central to reality’ (Bennett, 2007, p. 62). These findings correlate to the first two levels of Deardorff’s (2007) pyramid model of intercultural competence: 1) Requisite skills (respect, openness, curiosity) and 2) Knowledge and comprehension (cultural self-awareness; culture-specific information, for e.g., the language barrier and Thanksgiving). Although there was a shift towards culturally responsive teaching, the extent to which deeply held ethnocentric beliefs and practices had changed is unclear.

This research has shown that a short, rigorously planned and structured international experience in a ‘similar but different’ cultural setting creates significant opportunities to link theory with practice by deepening preservice teachers’ intercultural understanding and disposition for global education (ACARA, 2013). The commitment by the partner University academics, host school, mentors and homestay parents is

crucial in facilitating and supporting the *perceptual understanding* and *personal growth* (Wilson, 1993) which underpins intercultural understanding. Through a carefully prepared program of pre-departure briefings, regular, structured communication and concurrent self-reporting strategies, preservice teachers are able to process their new experiences and develop professional learning to enhance professional and personal knowledge for teaching consistent with Standard 1.3 (AITSL, 2017). Extensive use of these reflective tools paved the way for intercultural understanding to prepare preservice teachers to embrace a culturally responsive approach to teaching (Tangen et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Initial teacher education strives to deliver classroom readiness through course-work and supervised placements but being entrenched in one's own culture can be a barrier to responding to cultural difference. Developing preservice teachers' own cultural awareness is critical to teach intercultural understanding and global education as required by the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2013) and standards for teaching (AITSL, 2017). This study of the QSU program has added an Australian dimension to international research to show that experience in 'similar but different' overseas settings builds teachers' knowledge by challenging ethnocentric views, building dispositions for global education and professional purpose and relationships. It illustrates the benefit of integrating theory and practice, reinforced by a structured program of cultural learning.

To manage cultural dislocation and to capitalise on the intercultural benefits of an international practicum, it is critical to incorporate strategies for pre-departure preparation and ongoing professional and personal reflection. By setting up the expectations of the placement and prompting reflection, a three-week professional placement in a 'similar but different' setting can impact preservice teachers' empathetic

understanding of the educational and social challenges confronting students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The common language, English, proved decisive in highlighting cultural differences and prompted constructive reflection on diversity. Moreover, the experience of being mentored in a different culture revealed preservice teachers were open to global education and recognised opportunities to embed it in their practice. Despite the cost and organisational complexity of setting up these programs, a tightly structured international practicum in a ‘similar but different’ setting alerts preservice teachers to the complexities of teaching for cultural and socioeconomic diversity as part of teachers’ knowledge.

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