

Understanding the other through international professional teaching experiences

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Universities encourage students to undertake international professional experiences so they can add international and intercultural dimensions to their development. This paper adopts a theoretical backdrop of neo-colonialism to investigate the experiences of four Australian pre-service teachers who jointly undertook an IPE in Bandung, Indonesia. Analysis of their journal entries illustrates how they struggled to make sense of their new cultural and organizational surroundings, and the new insights they gleaned. They were unprepared or under-prepared for the complexities of culture that they encountered. The paper also discusses the potential for IPE delegates to normalize typically “Western/Northern” ways of learning and teaching, and puts forth some recommendations for future IPEs. It aims to prompt discussion on the current and potential value, and possible pitfalls, of such programs.

Keywords: international education and mobility, intercultural competence, Southern theory, pre-service teaching, professional experience

INTRODUCTION

International mobility experiences offer vast potential to inform pre-service teachers and equip them with intercultural sensitivities and perspectives. However, they also embody normative, neo-colonial capacities for showcasing supposedly correct ways to conduct the business of teaching and learning (Buchanan & Widodo, 2016). This paper reports on the experiences of four Australian pre-service teachers undertaking a 10-day international professional experience (IPE) in Bandung, Indonesia, during which they taught English to Indonesian students. It investigates how the participants interpreted their surroundings and related to their hosts, and the resulting implications for their identities, their ongoing teaching skills and their capacities to challenge assumed global, cultural and pedagogical norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The prospects and problems associated with globalization have precipitated responses and strategies that optimize opportunities for international and intercultural interfaces. Various definitions exist for globalization and related terms such as internationalization and intercultural competence. Knight (2003, p. 2) defines international education as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. Globalization is “a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies and governments of different countries and regions (Codina, López, & Palé, 2014, p. 186); they contend that

universities have enthusiastically embraced international mobility programs in response to these global realities and to enhance student opportunities. Such uptake is, however, not universal (Yemini & Giladi, 2015).

The necessity and opportunity for teachers and other professionals to attain international and intercultural capital and sensitivities, and the capacity to respond appropriately to diversity, has emerged globally from the increased mobility of people and ideologies, and, specifically in Australia, through increasingly diverse communities and social divisions. International experiences confront the sojourner with rich and occasionally confounding multidimensionality and complexity (Bodycott, Mak, & Ramburuth, 2013). Reflecting on this complexity, Rizvi (2015) observes:

In the era of globalisation, the production and circulation of cultural practices is now to be found in a huge variety of spaces, both within and across national borders. Our cultural condition is increasingly a complex and ‘hybrid’ one, and cannot be packaged into a neat collection of ethnicities. (p. 67)

While this might obviate the need for international experiences, given ubiquitous, borderless intercultural and cross-cultural melanges, international experiences can throw into stark contrast one’s own and one’s hosts’ cultures.

One aim of international (professional) experiences is the synthesis of intercultural competence, the “effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations” (Deardorff, 2011, p. 66), requiring development of “specific attitudes, knowledge and skills.” Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p. 9) define intercultural competence as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive and behavioural orientations to the world”. Drawing on this, Holmes and O’Neill (2012, p. 716) assert that intercultural competence “involves critical cultural awareness of Self and Other in an intercultural encounter, with appropriate attention to relationship building, monitoring and managing emotions, empathy, and facework”. Teachers must “deal with regional, national and global problems, among other practices” (Morresi, Elías, & Marcos, 2014, p. 304). In the context of increasing intercultural and inter-ethnic tensions, both global and local, teachers are called upon to deal sensitively, equitably and knowledgeably with students from various linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, through a “culturally responsive pedagogy” (Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Petersen, & Welsh, 2013, p. 1). IPEs can effect such outcomes.

Many benefits accruing to participants from international and intercultural experiences are prized by universities and employers (Knight, 2006). International mobility programs offer “integrated approach of contents, contexts and activities for critical engagement in global dialogue . . . new perspectives . . . global connectedness” (Lehtomäki, Moate, & Posti-Ahokas, 2015, p. 1). They also benefit “students who cross national borders for the purpose or in the context of their studies” (Kelo, Teichler, & Wätcher, 2006, p. 5), enhance employment prospects (Potts, 2015) and inform teacher attributes (Schwartzter & Bridglall, 2015) by broadening horizons (Lingard, Hardy, & Heimans, 2012).

Intercultural encounters enable conversations between the new and the known (Lundegård & Wickman, 2011). As Edgerton (1996, p. 166) contends, “one cannot ‘see’ or hear the familiar until it is made strange.” During intercultural experiences, the ordinary is disrupted (Dantas, 2007) “by someone else’s ordinary” (Buchanan, Major,

Harbon, & Kearney, 2017), thereby prompting dialogue between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the sojourner's heart and mind.

Kuh (2008) commends high-impact encounters, such as service learning, and diversity learning, which explores “difficult differences, such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality” (p. 1). IPEs, as examples of such programs, should be transformational for participants (Deardorff, 2006), encompassing personal changes that are cognitive and technical (Gorski, 2008), affective (Perry & Southwell, 2011) and conative (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015). Numerous frameworks have been designed to measure and enhance effectiveness of intercultural programs (Buchanan et al., 2017). One such framework, the PEER (prepare, engage, evaluate, reflect) model was developed by Holmes and O'Neill (2012) to assist in designing and evaluating intercultural experiences. As their student informants engaged with Others, Holmes and O'Neill noticed their “acknowledging reluctance and fear, foregrounding stereotypes, moving beyond stereotyping, monitoring feelings, working through confusion, moving from complacency to complexity, and acknowledging boundaries around competence” (p. 711). These capacities illustrate the iterative, complex nature of such encounters and responses.

Australia increasingly focuses on Asia at the expense, arguably, of attention to our Pacific Island neighbours. Toe (2015) contends that evaluating Australian teachers' Asia literacy is complex. Despite political and bureaucratic attempts to improve this situation, cross-curricular studies of Asia in Australia enjoy but a “patchy presence” (Halse, 2015, p. 13).

Australian teacher education providers have established IPEs in response to global, regional and local realities (Knight, 2012). The Australian Curriculum includes Intercultural Understanding as one of seven General Capabilities (ACARA, 2013a), and Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia as a Cross-curriculum Priority (ACARA, 2013b). According to The Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority (ACARA, n.d.), intercultural understanding “assists young people to become responsible local and global citizens, equipped through their education for living and working together in an interconnected world.” Kostogriz (2015, p. 103) sees Asia literacy as a “double imperative” for Australian schoolteachers, for economic and socially just reasons. Dyer (2015) commends in-country experiences for enhancing teachers' international literacy. Nevertheless, IPE evaluation remains under-researched and under-interrogated (Arkoulis, Baik, Marginson, & Cassidy, 2012; Buchanan et al., 2017), as part of a “false halo of internationalisation” (Lee, 2013, p. 5). Petrón and Ates (2015) conclude that international programs operate without theory, evaluation and research, and are “evaluated” primarily by participant numbers. Knight (2013) observes a displacement over time of earlier philanthropic motives behind international exchange by more venal ones on the part of wealthy nation universities, and calls for ethical, values-based dimensions to international programs.

While Australian IPE sojourners will inevitably learn something of new destinations, the encounters may not be universally positive, and could reinforce, rather than overcome, essentialist or stereotypical forethoughts related to hosts' ethnicity, race or religion (Forsy, Broomhall, & Davis, 2012; Palacios, 2010). Similarly, Holmes and O'Neill (2012) have explored the complexity and contestation of intercultural competence and warn of reinforcing cultural stereotypes through intercultural encounters.

The theoretical backdrop for these investigations includes neo-colonial theory, post-colonial theory (Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Hickling-Hudson, 2007; McLeod, 2000) and Southern theory (Connell, 2007, 2014). Neo-colonialism was defined in 1961 by the All-African People's Congress as

[T]he survival of the colonial system in spite of the formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries which become the victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military or technical means (Falola, 2001, p. 111).

Postcolonial theory seeks to make “theoretical sense out of [a colonial] past” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4).

Southern theory draws on the metonymous developing Global South and the developed North, which mostly refer to degrees of economic development. In neo-colonial theory, these terms are also associated with the impact made on the indigenous populations in colonised Southern countries by the colonising Northern ones. The “West” is another expression of the Global North. Australia is regarded as part of the Global North and Indonesia the Global South (Shekar, 2015).

Southern theory resists definition (Connell, 2014, p. 210); it is “not a fixed set of propositions but a challenge to develop new knowledge projects and new ways of learning with globally expanded resources”. From an educational perspective, Connell (2015) argues:

If indigenous knowledge is to function in a world dominated by the knowledge systems of the colonising society, if it is to be validated and made effective, it must be capable of development and growth . . . be open to critique and evaluation . . . there has to be a mutual learning process. (p. 38)

This paper sets out to understand and explain the extent and nature of this mutuality of learning in our participants' experiences.

THE IPE AND PARTICIPANTS

This 10-day IPE, in September 2015, required our participants to teach with one or two teaching partners for two hours per day at a local primary and/or secondary school. It was brokered between the visiting university and the Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung. Students submit written applications to undertake an IPE, and must pass a preparatory, accredited subject. The subject addresses methodologies in teaching English to international students and issues of culture and acculturation. Not all students in this subject subsequently undertake the IPE, however, so the subject is, of necessity, broader in scope than the Indonesian context. Accompanying academics for the program respond to calls for expressions of interest for the role. The accompanying academic on this occasion had not visited the host city previously, but has travelled widely, including to Muslim-majority countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, and Iran. The author visited Bandung beforehand, and prepared briefing notes for the students and the accompanying academic. Some institutional funding is available to offset students' travel costs.

Five Australian female pre-service teachers undertook the IPE, of whom four furnished final responses permitting their anonymous use in publications. Here they are named Alice, Maria, Patricia and Tina. While reference is routinely made to Indonesian culture

as though it were monolithic, the local language and culture are Sundanese, one of Indonesia's many language/cultural groups.

All four respondents were of Asian, Middle Eastern or European backgrounds and in their third year of a four-year teacher education course in Australia. An academic accompanied them to observe lessons, provide feedback and moral support, and to write their reports.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This is essentially a case study, a well-established method in investigations of IPEs (Anderson, Young, Blanch, & Smith, 2015; Buchanan, 2004; Buchanan, et al., 2017). The project set out to investigate the effects of the IPE via participants' reported critical incidents, as "we, the researchers, try to make sense of the student researchers' sense-making" (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012, p. 711).

Data collection instruments comprised journals that the students were asked to maintain during the IPE, in modes of the students' choosing, such as pen and paper, or digitally. The participants were asked to record critical incidents immediately, or as soon as practicable, afterwards, for the purposes of accuracy and immediacy. Given the IPE's demands, however, the participants mostly furnished information after completing the IPE. Nonetheless, some of their accounts retain a vivid immediacy. Informed participant consent was obtained as part of the University's ethics approval procedures.

Directions and instructions for reporting critical incidents were minimal. Participants were asked to describe the event or incident and their thoughts, feelings and responses. Prompts included: "I wish I'd known . . .", and "I'm glad I knew . . ." Participants were advised that "critical" indicated "significant" rather than negative or unpleasant. While the reporting of these incidents typically encompassed school-related or other communication breakthroughs and frustrations, they also included new learnings, challenges or confirmations concerning presumed truths and hypotheses.

The study also explored participants' assumptions about their hosts, asking them to reflect on the following questions: To what extent and how do IPEs challenge your assumptions and worldviews? How do you respond to these challenges? In particular, I sought mis/matches between our participants' and the local teachers' assumed ways of "doing school". Sund and Lysgaard (2013) assert that all education is normative, noting a "lure of normativity" (p. 1606). While such reflections may contribute to increased participant self-awareness, they may also be normative if the intent of encountering others is "to prove them wrong" (Hayhurst, Giles, Radforth, & the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society, 2015, p. 952), or if they lead to neo-colonial appraisals of the IPE host institutions.

Consistent with a qualitative paradigm (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), the study adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the research questions driving the project, and the data fuelling it. Data were analysed in open then axial mode (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), to distil themes and interconnections.

The study is small in scale, which limits generalisation. Host perceptions were not investigated here, but have been reported on elsewhere by the researcher and the contact at the host university (Buchanan & Widodo, 2016). Follow-up interviews would be useful in confirming and expanding on the information generated for this study, and

could be incorporated into similar future studies. The longer-term impacts of an IPE also warrant further study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Six major themes were discerned from the four participants' responses. They highlight the lessons learned during this IPE.

First impressions

Of day one, Maria recollected: "I was very surprised because of how different it was from Australia. Bandung was very, very busy and overcrowded; it was also dusty, underdeveloped and polluted". Alice observed there were, "no pedestrian crossings or traffic lights to cross. Therefore getting to school and walking around was a bit stressful. The crazy amount of cars and motorbikes did not help." She illustrated this with an anecdote:

A friend and I went to walk around yesterday to look for places to eat, however after 10 minutes of walking we decided to go back, as we felt extremely lost and it was too hectic for us to get around. There were a large amount of motorbikes and cars around. It was really hard to cross the road.

Two respondents also expressed surprise and some apparent indignation at not being advised beforehand that they would be teaching in a "Muslim school". Both host schools are comprehensive. Nevertheless, most of the schools' staff and students are practising Muslims, and Islam pervades Indonesian society much more extensively than does any faith in Australia, where government schools are, in theory, secular and, mostly, in practice, non-sectarian. These participants' astonishment took me by surprise in return. The briefing notes provided prior to departure only referred to Islam in passing. Knowledge on the part of our participants of Indonesia's faith-demographic was an ill-founded presumption on my part.

The local dress code arose as problematic for participants who had assumed short-sleeved t-shirts acceptable for teaching. For Tina, this transcended school; she described it as part of her culture shock: "Most of the people who lived there were mostly covered up because of the culture". Adapting to local food was another challenge, Tina recalling: "The traditional food was mostly spicy . . . they definitely do not have much of a variety of different cultural food like Sydney."

Maria reacted dramatically to these cultural differences, suffering

[A] really bad panic attack, which resulted in a nosebleed. I thought I couldn't get through it, but with the help of my friends and [accompanying academic supervisor] I responded to it in a positive way and fought through it. I was scared, stressed out and homesick.

These differences were not problematic for all participants, however. Alice described the culture and traditions as "extremely different to Australia", but saw this as a "high point" of her IPE. One of her first impressions also concerned approaches to teaching, which she accepted as positively challenging, reporting, "It will be interesting to create lessons that do not involve technology."

Student-teacher interactions

The language barrier, cultural norms and ways of dealing with awkwardness and saving face created some confusion and frustration for our participants. Maria recounted:

Another incident is when I was teaching/giving instructions, and some students had no idea what I am trying to say. They just stared blankly at me and I think that's when I realised that communicating would be challenging . . . A frustrating incident was when the students spoke in Indonesian and sometimes they laughed while I was just standing there and I obviously had no idea what they were saying or what they were laughing about. This actually happened more than once (maybe five times over the two-week period).

Similarly, Alice recalled: "When I walked around and asked the students questions they would usually turn to their friends and talk and laugh in Indonesian. I'm not sure if they were talking about me, or laughing because they didn't understand." Maria and Alice appear to have interpreted this as possible mockery, as might be the case in an Australian classroom. And yet, this observation contradicts another of Maria's comments about the children and their respectful attitude – at least outwardly – to teachers:

I loved how the students showed so much respect towards their teachers . . . they would come to me at the end of class and they would shake my hand and place it on their heads as a sign of respect in their culture.

Our participants inevitably made comparisons with classrooms they had experienced in Australia. Tina observed: "[Indonesian] students are often very polite and respectful to their teachers. It was eye-opening for me in terms of the comparison between schools in Sydney and the school that I taught at in Bandung". Alice recounted: "In Australia, I feel as though the students aren't as respectful," whereas the local students "would actively listen, and not call back or talk back". Maria found this respect:

[R]eally heart-warming since the students in Australia would usually bolt out of the classroom at the end of the class/day . . . Another thing I loved was that they refer to their teachers by their first name but add the word "ibu", meaning mother/teacher, at the end as a sign of respect. I think it was great being called by my first name because it made me feel more connected to the students as opposed to being called by my surname and feeling as if I had to hide my identity.

These boundaries of respect don't necessarily align with typical Australian interactions; a student initiating a handshake with a teacher, while part of a respectful gesture in Indonesia, might be seen as somewhat forward in an Australian context. Alice learnt from her experience "how a student from another country coming to Australia feels". She noticed,

No real boundaries when asking questions. Many of the students would ask me for my Instagram or FB [Facebook] and would ask if I had a boyfriend. In Australia the students would not ask these questions, as they are deemed inappropriate. However the students in Indonesia are not aware of these boundaries that Australia has.

Our respondents were surprised that no reward system operated in their host classes. As Patricia observed, however, “after I gave a class rewards, the next class, I had their attention from the start. It was like I was in a different class.”

Teaching resources

Paucity of teaching resources appears to have unearthed a normative streak in our respondents, even those who saw resource paucity positively. They ascribed inferiority to a resource-scarce approach to teaching and learning. Alice reported that her students “only worked from workbooks”, considering this limiting to their progress in learning English. Tina agreed, saying: “I am very lucky to live in Australia where lots of resources are provided for me, whereas the school I taught at the students did not have any . . . resources like books, computers or printers. I was unable to print any worksheets for students”.

Alice wrote at the mid-point of the IPE, “Teaching in Indonesia is difficult for me”, describing constant class changes as “a bit overwhelming” and referring to her difficulty in explaining instructions to her students and the gulf between the primary and secondary students’ English abilities. Adding to the unpredictability of lessons was an ability-streaming of classes; ascertaining the abilities of one class did not afford prediction of a “parallel” class’s abilities. This resulted in lessons pitched either beyond or below the capabilities of several students. It appears to have been difficult for the participants to apprise themselves beforehand of the ability levels of their students.

Relationships with supervising teachers

The participants found that aspects of previous relationships with cooperating classroom teachers were somewhat upended. More than in typical Australian schools, the local teachers solicited our participants’ ideas on teaching and learning. Patricia indicated that although her supervising teacher had been teaching for 12 years,

He really liked the new ideas we have, and the new ways we approached teaching and topics . . . He also found it rather interesting that we use a stimulus at the start of the lesson (e.g. a role play with my teaching partner) . . . He liked that we were so flexible and that he will think about this more when he plans his lessons . . . He was very impressed with our course . . . He said he had many visiting teachers, but he was very impressed with us.

Such compliments possibly constitute guest/host niceties. Nevertheless, local teachers who are unimpressed with the pre-service teachers’ performances, might reasonably remain silent rather than accord praise. Patricia noted, however, a bilateral “expertise ecology”, whereby the teacher, who also disliked the local students’ dependence on textbooks or worksheets, offered suggestions for lesson refinement.

While some Indonesian traditional approaches appeared unfavourable to our respondents, Patricia recognised the contribution of direct instruction in language classes. In Western/Northern contexts, direct instruction is at times viewed as inferior to inductive or inquiry learning (Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, & Tenenbaum, 2011; Lazonder, 2013). To their frustration, our participants found that their students appeared unfamiliar with techniques such as group work and brainstorming. While the language barrier may have exacerbated their concerns, our participants’ reactions point to the pedagogical assumptions they carried into these situations.

Adapting

Despite superimposing some of their cultural assumptions on their new circumstances, our participants recognised their dependence on their hosts for all-important local knowledge. All four IPE respondents grew into their new environment during their stay. Maria, who had earlier suffered a panic attack, “enjoyed every minute in Bandung. YES, it was challenging but it was awesome!” And Alice, who had found her 10-minute foray into the traffic hectic, was able to say by the IPE midpoint:

I am becoming more independent when going around to go to the shops. I am familiar with catching an angkot [*angkutan kota*, a local mini van public transport shuttle service] and how to get off. However, crossing the road still seems to be an issue . . . [The IPE] was a great experience that will develop your cultural understanding of the world . . . Be open to new things and immersing [yourself] in the culture . . . You really need to explore and go out to experience and appreciate the culture.

On the final teaching day, Alice listed benefits including gaining confidence and independence, working without technology, determining students’ levels of English and adapting lessons accordingly, making friends and appreciating “the similarities and differences of the Indonesian and Australian culture”; “overall it was a great experience that I will always appreciate”.

As with the local teacher who complimented our participants, it may be that student politesse is in part driving some of these responses. Patricia summarised a host of positive challenges by advising, “prepare to be unprepared”. These responses, while heart-warming, nevertheless appear somewhat naïve and romantic, as discussed later.

Sources of help and support

The process of adaptation was considerably helped by support from locals and the accompanying academic. Clearly, the involvement of an understanding, empathic, and supportive academic supervisor is essential for a successful IPE, particularly if participants encounter difficulties or emergencies. Maria, who reported the panic attack, recorded: “I think having [accompanying academic] there made it a lot easier since she was very supportive and was basically our mother there, so I am glad she took part because it would have been very different without her.”

Local university students also greatly assisted our participants in adjusting and adapting. Patricia reported that the locals hosted visits to an angklung musical performance and to “craters [Tangkuban Perahu, a nearby volcano], museums, the mosque, shopping and going to try food . . . we gained a better understanding of Indonesian and Sundanese culture.” Tina described the local people as “very nice and helpful”, and Alice recalled that the Bandung tertiary students “were able to tell us stories from their own culture and how it is to live in Indonesia . . . very helpful when taking us around and showing us Bandung”. Maria explained: “we were very lost and confused . . . They helped us with basically everything – things like, looking for SIM cards and exchanging money. So I am also glad that we befriended them!”

Some contacts made during the IPE appear to be ongoing. For Alice, connecting with locals “was a highlight because [we] have now become lifelong friends”. Patricia

swapped contact details with her Indonesian friends, hoping in future “to exchange ideas and learn from each other’s cultures”, possibly through Skype-connected classrooms.

At times, the IPE participants appeared aware of possible colonial attitudes on the part of Westerners in Indonesia. Patricia, who described herself as a seasoned traveller but unused to four-star hotels (such as the Bandung Mercure), explained:

A low point for me, was seeing how wasteful some of the hotel guests were when it came to food, or saying please and thank you; taking lots of food because it is a buffet, and not finishing it, and taking another plate of more food. Not acknowledging the staff who clear your table because you pay to be there. I felt rather sad and embarrassed at times to see this, and to know that outside our hotel, there is such a big gap between the haves and have nots.

It is inferred here that Patricia was referring to “Western” hotel guests, and is bringing “Australian norms” of culture to bear on their behaviour. Some of these behaviours might be interpreted differently if attributed to “Asians”, and might not attract attention or opprobrium in a less international context.

Recognising the applicability of her IPE to teaching, Patricia wrote: “I don't feel like I could make a difference with the guests at this hotel, but I do hope to take this lesson back to my classroom.”

Three overarching themes emerge from these data: superiority/inferiority; strange ways – theirs and ours, and; processing new information. Our respondents typically imputed inferior or deficit values to local ways – the traffic, “inappropriate” student familiarity, and limited technology. They did, however, report some local positives, or at least their own concessions thereto – student respect, and creativity borne of technology-limited teaching. Patricia, perhaps a group outlier, discerned questionable Western traits, such as arrogance and food wastage. This gives rise to a three-stage or -tier yardstick or continuum, against which status, progress or regression might be described or measured: unquestioning repudiation of local customs; a concessional accommodation thereof; ascription of worth to local ways. Optimally, this third level might critique and valorise local and “home” customs equitably. Our participants, through the filter of their written responses, appear to have attained at least the middle stratum on most occasions, although their reactions, such as a panic attack, might suggest repudiation. Further research might put the proposed continuum to the test.

Progress-wise, all the participants appeared to reconcile somewhat the us/them differences. This is encouraging, given the IPE’s brevity and multifarious demands. It vindicates, and perhaps invites additional, institutional support before, during and after the IPE, as participating students process their experiences as part of their formation.

CONCLUSIONS

This IPE experience elicited positive, insightful and memorable journal entries. It allowed the participants to discover, as much as an outsider can, “how it is to live in Indonesia” (Patricia, journal entry). But when an international visitor attempts to build a cultural bridge between home and host countries (Gordon & Liu, 2015), the latter’s cultural grammar (Holliday, 2013) can appear arbitrary, inconsistent, and anarchic. The mixed messages of respect from the Indonesian children left our participants scrabbling for meaning.

More broadly, the IPE offers insights into cultural inequalities and hegemonies of dominant Western/Northern ways of doing and being. Just as English has become a global lingua franca, such Western ways can become a “cultura franca” – a set of globally normed ways of operating (Buchanan & Widodo, 2016). In Bandung, the cultural dissonances between the pre-service teachers and their hosts emerged starkly in the operation and delivery of pedagogy. Our participants arrived armed with procedural assumptions, and subsequently explored and confronted multiple and hybrid responses and identities (see Marginson, 2014). While it is valuable for our respondents to acquire an appreciation of the opportunities and affordances (both subjective terms) they enjoy in Australia, it would be unfortunate if their IPEs were to become opportunities to “prove their host institutions wrong” (Hayhurst et al., 2015). And while there is little evidence from this study to suggest that the local teachers were eager to embrace Western methods, it would be similarly unfortunate if they were to do so at the expense of their own contextually effective pedagogies.

Returning to the PEER framework (Holmes & O’Neill, 2012), our participants appear to have been ill-prepared for the experience. The briefing notes overestimated their prior knowledge, and the accompanying subject focused more specifically on matters of English teaching. Moreover, the participants typically do not appear to have transcended naïve or romantic notions of the host culture, as illustrated by some of the end-of-IPE journal entries. This may also have implications for the “engage” component of the PEER cycle; the participants’ comments foreground their teaching experiences over their intercultural ones. Their romantic notions extended to school operations, regarding less technology as a challenge, with associated implications of inferiority. With time, the pre-service teachers may reflect on their experiences more deeply, and in more sophisticated ways. Upon return, however, it is difficult to discern evidence of this. Future research might inquire about the longer-term professional and personal effects on IPE returnees. For reasons of cost to students, and equivalence with the corresponding onshore professional experience, the duration is deliberately short. The two-week time period may be limited in its capacity for transformation (Deardorff, 2006), providing insufficient time for the pre-service teachers to transcend responses of shock, confusion or romance, and to embrace complexity (Holmes & O’Neill, 2012; Rizvi, 2015) in order to engage more deeply with the culture, and their own responses to it. Participants’ post-IPE reflections may offer opportunities for this, however.

Intercultural exchanges by university students are routinely touted for their vast potential for learning, exchanging of ideas, and developing leadership in disrupting racism (Boske, 2015). There is a risk, though, that an IPE may fall short of challenging visitors’ assumptions, and may, thereby, become globally normative for all concerned. Compounding this, some participant observations are disarmingly naïve. Some appear unready to critically examine their own cultural positionings. The potential for such experiences to reinforce hegemonic ways of operating begs further interrogation. A valuable component of IPE preparation, engagement and reflection would be to consider such issues, rendering them more visible, as part of the “(in)congruities, complementarities and dissonances” (Holmes and O’Neill, 2012, p. 715) on the road to increasingly complex intercultural understandings.

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