

Supervising an international teaching practicum: building partnerships in postcolonial contexts

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Abstract

Teaching practicum experiences, including those in international contexts, are based on partnerships between institutions and host schools, and the partnership between the pre-service teacher, the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor. This article explores the relationship between pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers in an international practicum in the Solomon Islands. It considers the way the cooperating teachers were positioned within the partnership, and raises questions about the way the university engages with host schools and teachers in international contexts, particularly in developing countries. Drawing on postcolonial theory, we investigate the complexity and contradictions in relationships between the pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers. We conclude by offering suggestions for valuing the role of cooperating teachers in these contexts.

Keywords

Teaching practicum, partnership, international experience, postcolonialism, teacher education

Introduction

Professional field-based or practicum experiences are a central element of initial teacher education. They offer pre-service teachers opportunities to connect theory and practice and to enact pedagogical strategies learned in their university preparation programmes. The aim of professional experiences is to “create a social learning structure whereby student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university personnel collectively share in the creation of common goals ...” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p. 54). Professional experiences are grounded in a three-way relationship between the pre-service teacher, cooperating teacher¹ (also called associate teacher or supervising teacher) and the university supervisor/mentor² which provides the basis for guidance of the pre-service teacher to ensure appropriate progress. This relationship requires a supportive structure in the form of an “ongoing, shared learning agenda divided equally between school and university – one in which there is a true partnership of equity and responsibility” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p. 54). This notion of a partnership is apparent in much of the literature about professional experiences in education (also called teaching practicum and field experience); however, in practice effective partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions seem difficult to consistently achieve. A number of studies report that insufficient or inadequate training of cooperating teachers for their role, and a lack of clear communication about the roles of the pre-service teacher, cooperating teacher and university supervisor contribute to problems within professional experiences (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014; Holbert, 2010; Koc, 2012; Norman, 2011). Norman describes the triadic practicum relationship as “fraught with tensions including power and position” (2011, p. 50). It seems that the ideal partnership providing a supportive structure is rarely achieved, and the roles and expectations of each member of the practicum triad frequently lack clarity.

¹ Cooperating, associate and supervising teachers are classroom teachers who host pre-service teachers in their classroom for practicum experiences.

² The university supervisor/mentor is from the teacher education institution and liaises with the host school and teacher during the practicum experience, and assists in the evaluation of the pre-service teacher’s performance.

In addition to 'at home' professional experiences, international professional experiences are increasingly being offered as an option in teacher preparation programmes, as a way of addressing goals related to internationalisation such as developing intercultural competence. Research suggests that international practicum opportunities can enhance deeper understandings of other cultures and cultural practices (Kissock & Richardson, 2010), develop intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and culturally responsive teaching practices (Dantas, 2007). It has been noted by some scholars that international experiences must be supported by academic programmes that include opportunities for students to engage with the issues related to intercultural competence and diversity, and to reflect on attitudes and assumptions related to these issues (Dantas, 2007; Santoro & Major, 2012).

Much research in the area of international practicum experiences serves to evaluate and validate the value of international experiences for enhancing pre-service teachers' self efficacy in culturally diverse contexts. Few studies consider the relationship between pre-service teachers and host teachers in international contexts, or the role that host teachers play in this context.

This article aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between pre-service teachers and host teachers during a four-week international professional experience in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands undertaken by seven Australian pre-service teachers from an Australian university. The study on which this article reports investigated had two main aims: to investigate how an international teaching practicum shapes pre-service teachers' attitudes towards difference and diversity, and how international practicum experiences can contribute to the development of intercultural competence and culturally responsive practices. However, analysis of the data revealed tensions and contradictions in the ways that the pre-service teachers positioned the Solomon Island cooperating teachers, and raised questions about university policy and practice in regards to the design and implementation of international practicum programmes.

In the next section we provide an outline of education in the Solomon Islands and its colonial past. We then discuss professional experience partnerships and the role of cooperating teachers. A postcolonial framework provides an analytical lens through which we consider the negative implications for the cooperating teachers and the pre-service teachers when deficit models about different educational practices are reinforced and perpetuated in developing country contexts. We use a postcolonial stance to problematise the relationship between the teacher education institution, its students and staff, and host institutions and teachers, and to investigate the complexity and contradictions in these relationships. We conclude by offering some suggestions for acknowledging and valuing the role of cooperating teachers in international professional experiences in developing countries, and building effective partnerships in this space.

Colonisation and education in the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands were a protectorate of Britain from 1893 to 1978, at which point independence was gained. The period from 1998 to 2003 marked a time of political upheaval and violence when rebels on the island of Guadalcanal fought to overthrow the Malaitan Prime Minister, which occurred via a coup in 2000. New Zealand and Australian military forces became involved at this point and from 2003 Australian defence forces established RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands) which assisted Solomon Islands' police to maintain law and order across the island group. Political instability continued, but from 2003 economic and infrastructure rebuilding began, although this has been highly dependent on foreign aid (Whalan, 2011).

Formal education in the Solomon Islands, which is not compulsory, grew out of the activities of missionaries. The official language of instruction is English and teaching materials such as textbooks are produced in English. However, particularly in the early primary years, instruction frequently occurs in Pidgin and local languages, of which there are many throughout the islands. The organisation of the curriculum, including the choice of discipline areas, reflects Western education

priorities and organisation. In 1984, Thomas and Postlethwaite asserted that education curricula in Pacific Island nations were “designed mainly to westernise Pacific Peoples” and that they offered little to people who wished to follow a “traditional style of life” (p. 317, cited in Bray, 1993, p. 338). Bray suggests that little has changed since then, and the “structure and orientation of schools remains strongly Western” with curriculum design dominated by “western concepts and fashion” (1993, p. 338).

Part of the reason for this is that the education sector remains dependent on significant financial support from the international community for the development of curriculum materials, and to cover fees for school attendance (Whalan, 2011). While the Solomon Islands Government manages its own teacher education and supply, and has its own curriculum, this has been heavily influenced by New Zealand curricula via curriculum review and development projects funded by the European Union and New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) (UNESCO, n.d.). Similarly, text books and education resources have been developed in conjunction with international education consultants. Writing about an NZAID project to build capacity in teacher education in the Solomon Islands, Alcorn (2010) notes a lack of written resources about Solomon Islands education by Solomon Islanders. She links this to the use of “inappropriate texts and readings in schools and higher education during the mission era – but also since greater State involvement after independence” (p. 462). She describes the tendency of Solomon Island teachers to privilege Western knowledge and theory over indigenous knowledge and practice in curriculum content and pedagogy.

The ongoing input and control of Solomon Islands curriculum and thus, pedagogy, by external Western aid agencies ensures a colonial echo throughout the education system. As Tikly (2009) reminds us, low-income countries, like the Solomon Islands, have limited capacity to determine their own education agendas and it is not surprising that the ongoing effects of colonisation are evident in the education system.

Professional experience partnerships and cooperating teachers

A common theme in the professional experience literature related to pre-service teacher education is the importance of the partnership between school and teacher education institution. Allen, Butler-Mader and Smith (2010) suggest that the aim of such partnerships is to share “resources, expertise, facilities and decision-making to achieve a common goal” (p. 617), and that effective partnerships lead to successful professional experiences for pre-service teachers. However, the ‘traditional divide’ between schools and teacher education institutions is a perennial problem, with each frequently being ignorant of the other’s beliefs, values and practices (Allen, Butler-Mader & Smith, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). Bloomfield (2009) says professional experience needs to be more than “a poorly reimbursed professional service delivered by teachers to teacher education institutions” (p. 30). She suggests that universities are frequently driven by the need to secure “sufficient numbers of school placements for student teachers” (p. 36) and this occurs at the expense of building strong, collaborative partnerships. Darling Hammond (2006) concurs, criticising the “clinical side of teacher education” as “haphazard, depending on the idiosyncrasies of loosely selected placements with little guidance ... and little connection to university work” (p. 308). Bloomfield (2009) and Darling Hammond (2006) advocate the development of professional learning opportunities and mutual exchange as the basis for effective professional experience partnerships which position cooperating teachers as part of the teacher education team, and open the way for more symmetrical and reciprocal relationships.

The role of cooperating teachers encompasses making connections between the classroom and university coursework, socialising pre-service teachers into the school context, developing skills and strategies for teaching, guiding planning and management, and providing professional and personal development (Holbert, 2010). In a review of sixty years of literature about cooperating teachers, Clarke, Triggs and Nielsen (2014) identify three common conceptions that teacher educators hold about cooperating teachers. The first is that the cooperating teacher is a “classroom

placeholder” where the pre-service teacher changes places with the classroom teacher who lets the pre-service teacher take over the classroom and becomes absent to a greater or lesser degree. Second is the cooperating teacher as practicum supervisor where the cooperating teacher oversees the pre-service teacher’s work in applying what they learned in their university course. Finally, the cooperating teacher as “teacher educator” describes the cooperating teacher who works closely with the pre-service teacher to coach them into the teaching role. This last role requires cooperating teachers who are knowledgeable about education literature and current debates (Clarke, et al., 2014, p. 167). Clearly, the third view is the ideal, but is only achieved when teacher education institutions do the work needed to build relationships and collaborations with schools to enable cooperating teachers to take up such roles.

An acknowledged problem in professional experience partnerships is the differential power relations amongst the participants. On the one hand, universities are seen as, and often act as “purveyors of knowledge and skills” (Allen, et al., 2010, p. 626) in relationships with schools and pre-service teachers. On the other hand, cooperating teachers have the power to “deny access to the student teacher’s chosen profession” (Adams, Morehead & Sledge, 2008, p. 121). These dynamics are not a good basis for developing effective partnerships. Power dynamics are further complicated by the fact that the cooperating teacher usually has a limited role in guiding the pre-service teacher and frequently no role in determining the outcome of the professional experience; this role falls largely to the university supervisor. In addition, as this article will reveal, the complexity of relationships in postcolonial spaces, where cooperating teachers may not share the same first culture or language, or notions of what counts as best practice with pre-service teachers, has implications for building partnerships in international contexts.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism has the potential to reveal and assist understandings of “the dialectical relationship between the colonizers and colonized” (Rizvi, Lingard & Lavia, 2006, p. 256). Postcolonial scholars are concerned with exploring “the philosophical, economic and sociocultural consequences of colonialism” (Hickling-Hudson, Matthews & Woods, 2004, p. 2); that is, the ongoing effects of colonisation on the cultural, economic and social life of postcolonial societies. For many former colonies, the outcomes of these effects are “impoverishment, deep inequity in the sphere of global power, and problematic structures of governance” (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004, p. 4). Postcolonial theory is concerned with how colonial discourses continue to shape ways of talking, thinking and being in the world that have material outcomes for people in postcolonial contexts.

International practicum experiences are frequently taken up by pre-service teachers from ‘developed’ nations and occur in ‘developing’ countries. While the terms ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ are commonly used in this context, they are problematic and contested. The term ‘developing country’ is commonly used to refer to contexts that, in contrast to ‘developed’ countries and nations, are yet to achieve the political, social and economic status associated with development. Interrogation of the concept of ‘development’ reveals that it is often defined and understood from a ‘Western’ perspective drawing on concepts such as progress to validate ongoing interference by the West in the political, economic, social and educational systems of postcolonial societies, which are commonly represented as the backward ‘other’ (Andreotti, 2011; Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004). Development and aid discourses normalise the notion that postcolonial nations need assistance to join the developed, globalised world, and thus reproduce “various forms of Western hegemonic power” where the West becomes the model for the developing world (Kapoor, 2004, p. 628). A feature of many postcolonial societies is that despite political independence, the vestiges of colonialism remain in dominant narratives, and developing countries aspire to be like the West with Western superiority taken for granted and unquestioned (Andreotti, 2011; Hickling-Hudson, et al., 2004; Rizvi, Lingard & Lavia, 2006). Andreotti suggests that “Western interests are

universalized and naturalized in the rest of the world” so that ‘developing’ countries become complicit in discourses of development and aid (2011, p. 38).

Education plays a significant role in development discourses, particularly in relation to economic growth and poverty reduction (Tikly, 2009, p. 37). The education systems of many post-colonial societies rest on old colonial models characterised by unequal schooling structures, Eurocentric curricula, and embedded patterns of disadvantage which persist despite modifications (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004, p. 7). The influence of neoliberal global policies, which focus on economic growth and poverty reduction, result in low-income countries having limited capacity to determine their own education agendas due to the “disciplinary mechanisms of poverty conditional lending, poverty reduction and international target setting” (Tikly, 2009, p. 38). Linking aid funding to external imperatives compromises the ability of nations to pursue “indigenously determined priorities” (Tikly, 2009, p. 38) and further embeds Eurocentric systems of education and educational resources. It is, then, extremely difficult for former colonies to displace the inequitable structures of their colonial past which continue to be instantiated in Western influenced curricula, pedagogical approaches and exam systems. Yang (2014), in the context of higher education in China, suggests that neo-colonialism is perpetuated in education through the dominance of English in many disciplines, and as a medium of instruction in many postcolonial contexts. Nordtveit goes further concluding that the West is successfully exporting a “capitalist-modernity ideology” that traps developing countries into a “system of discontent” in which education and development will provide wealth, happiness and cultivation (2010, p. 335). Teaching practicum experiences that take place in developing countries potentially reinforce colonial discourses and can act as a form of neo-colonialism doing further damage or ‘violence’ in these contexts.

Methodology

The study was conducted in three primary schools and one secondary school in the Solomon Islands. All schools were administered by the Uniting Church. The university had a previous connection (in the 1980s and 90s) to the secondary school, and groups of pre-service teachers had undertaken visits up to 1995 when the political situation became too unstable. This, then, was the first year of a new programme. After obtaining ethics approval, pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers and principals were invited to participate in the study. Seven of the twelve pre-service teachers who undertook the four-week international experience agreed to participate in the study – all were women. Five of the twelve cooperating teachers, and three of the four school principals also agreed to be interviewed.

Participants

The pre-service teacher participants represented a range of ages and experiences. Karolyn³ was 31 years old and in her third year of a Bachelor of Education (Middle School). She was a maths specialist and was placed at the secondary school. Melanie was 46, and had participated in an international experience in India the previous year, which had been her first overseas experience. She was also in her third year of a Bachelor of Education (Middle School) specialising in English and History, and was placed at the secondary school. Abbey, 25 years old, was in the third year of an early childhood (EC) and primary teaching degree. She was placed in a Year 5 primary school class. Nicole and Belinda were both 20 years old and in the second year of an EC and primary degree. This was their first primary professional experience and they were placed with year 4 and 5 classes respectively. Nicole had previously travelled to Japan, and Belinda had volunteered at schools in Vanuatu and Bali. Evelyn was 28 years old and in the third year of a primary Bachelor of Education. She had experience in outdoor education, and was widely travelled. She had worked on a Canadian Summer Camp with culturally diverse children. Evelyn was placed in a kindergarten class of 5 year old children. Fiona, the

³ In order to protect participants' identities, all names and place names are pseudonyms.

oldest in the group at 54, was an experienced primary teacher who was completing a Masters in TESOL (Teaching English for speakers of other languages). She had previously taught in Indigenous communities in Australia and she was placed in a multi-level primary class.

Like the pre-service teachers, the cooperating teacher participants brought a range of experience to the partnership. James and Betty were primary school principals who were also experienced teachers. Betty was the only female principal in the local schools, and she had progressive ideas about education which she communicated to her staff and to the pre-service teachers. David had been a minister of religion, was in his first year as principal of a large secondary boarding school in the province, and was finding the role challenging. Three of the teacher participants worked at the secondary school. Beatrice and Constance were both secondary math teachers. Beatrice was in her 20s and had a degree but no teaching qualification. Constance, also in her 20s, was a trained teacher who was in her first teaching position. Pamela, on the other hand, was a very experienced secondary English teacher who had taught in secondary schools around Western Province and had hosted pre-service teachers from the Teacher Training College in Honiara. There were two primary teacher participants: Heather, who had trained as a teacher in Papua New Guinea, and was about to retire after many years teaching in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, and Faith, also a qualified teacher with eight years' experience.

Data collection

The first author was the accompanying academic and had responsibility for observing and writing the final professional experience reports for the pre-service teachers. To avoid any conflict of interest with the role as researcher, no data were collected from the seven pre-service teachers until after all grades were finalised. Semi structured interviews were conducted on two occasions; the first, within two months of returning to Australia, and the second, about six months later. The purpose of the first interview was to explore the participants' responses to their experiences in the

Solomon Islands and the impact of the experience on their attitudes towards diversity, and their feelings of intercultural competence as teachers. The second interview occurred after the pre-service teachers had undertaken further professional experience in Australia, and explored the extent to which the international professional experience impacted on subsequent teaching experiences. In the second round of interviews, a key question asked about the potential for the Solomon Islands' cooperating teachers to take a more active supervision role in the practicum.

The principals and cooperating teachers were interviewed in order to gather their views about the practicum experience and its impact on them, their schools and students. The English language level of the teachers and principals varied, but was adequate for successful interviews. In addition, reflective journals were maintained by the pre-service teachers and accompanying academic to record their perceptions of their experiences.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using a thematic approach that distilled pre-service teachers' responses to the international experience in terms of the interview questions. The interviews were transcribed, read and annotated as key themes for each participant were identified. Table formats organised the interview and journal data into emerging themes and the key aspects of each. For example, one theme that emerged from the pre-service teacher interview data was the experience of being an outsider, and the subthemes; being treated differently, conforming to a local dress code, and communicating with local people. The themes that emerged from the interviews with the principals and teachers included; the benefits of having Australian pre-service teachers in the school, the strengths and weaknesses of the pre-service teachers, their relationships within the schools, and comparisons between Australian and Solomon Islands' curriculum and teaching styles. Evidence of contradictory and troubling power relations in the relationships between the cooperating teachers and the pre-service teachers emerged from the data and forms the basis for the following discussion

of the data. The data used in this discussion is largely drawn from the pre-service teachers' interviews.

Findings

Tensions and contradictions in pre-service teachers' perceptions of education in the Solomon Islands

In discussing their perceptions of education in the Solomon Islands, the pre-service teachers expressed views that were often contradictory, highlighting the tensions and ambiguities that they grappled with as they tried to make sense of their experiences. On the one hand, all participants made negative comparisons between education in the Solomon Islands and Australia. On the other hand, they also recognised the experience and positive qualities of their cooperating teachers, and the challenges of the context, such as not being paid by the government for many months, and having limited access to ongoing professional development.

All the pre-service teachers suggested the pedagogies they witnessed in the Solomon Islands were backward, old-fashioned and behind the times. Abbey said: *"I felt like I was back in the 1960s or something like that...for me it felt like it was back a few years"*. Belinda added more detail in her description: *"It kind of reminded me of probably what teaching would have been like a hundred years ago in Australia. Like with the wooden desks, the blackboard and it was just very structured...the teacher teaches the kids. Like, there's no talking with the kids. It's just very basic teaching and basically the opposite to constructivism..."*. There were numerous examples in the interview data and from reflective journals of pre-service teachers describing the teaching they observed as inferior to education in Australia. Evelyn noted the amount of rote learning, and assumed that this meant that *"They see the students as like that empty vessel to be filled up"*. In her view there was no *"meaning making or critical thinking or even higher order thinking"*. The pre-service teachers viewed the pedagogical approaches as inferior and not in alignment with contemporary theory about

constructivism that they had been exposed to in their teacher education programme. Melanie wrote in her journal:

So the teacher stood out the front and delivered the information they wanted the students to know... Teaching was mainly from text books which I had a bit of trouble with - that's not the way we're taught to teach here in Australia.

The pre-service teachers' own lack of critical reflection is interesting, as there are undoubtedly examples of the styles of teaching mentioned here to be found in contemporary Australian classrooms. And, in fact, the five participants placed in primary classrooms acknowledged that there were practices, such as group work, that fitted with their views about the nature of effective and contemporary teaching. However, this was not sufficient to challenge their overall view of Solomon Islands' education as old fashioned and therefore, ineffective.

The pre-service teachers also commented on the poor resourcing of the schools in which they were placed. A consistent power supply, internet access, paper, chalk, art materials, many of the things they took for granted in Australian schools, were not part of their teaching reality in the Solomon Islands. There were textbooks for English, maths and science, but the teachers' reliance on these as the only source of teaching content and practice reflected, in the pre-service teachers' views, an impoverished pedagogy that was inferior to that of Australian teachers. Even where there were resources, the pre-service teachers commented that they weren't used and that the teachers *'didn't know how to use them and I don't think they knew how to organise a time so that they could be used productively'* (Fiona).

Their construction of a binary of Australian (Western) education approaches as superior and the Solomon Islands approaches as inferior, may have been confirmation and justification for some of the pre-service teachers that they were well placed to make a positive contribution to education in the Solomon Islands, and indeed, to the lives of Solomon Islanders. Santoro comments that

Australian pre-service teachers' views of Indian education and Indian teachers whilst on an international study trip were "embedded within discourses of benevolence and charity" (2014, p. 440) and that "there was little the pre-service teachers thought they could learn from the Indian teachers [which] may well have led to them constructing themselves as experts in comparison and therefore, well positioned to improve the Indian children's experiences of education" (Santoro, 2014 p. 439).

A recognised unintended consequence of study and volunteer abroad programmes is the tendency for participants to remain unaware of their own "inculcation in contemporary forms of imperialism" (Cook, 2014, p. 124). Cook, writing in the context of development workers, goes on to assert that in the process of helping others and developing oneself, one often "implicitly and unintentionally denigrates Others" (p. 130). This seems to be the case for the pre-service teachers who made few attempts to consider the context, culture or reasons why the styles of teaching they witnessed may have developed or been considered appropriate in the Solomon Islands' context. They were largely unable to shift their own cultural references and Western perspectives to consider alternative ways of understanding the education system and practices in the Solomon Islands.

This observation/analysis raises concerns about pre-service teacher preparation for the international experience programme. Participants were required to attend several pre-departure seminars to prepare them for their broader responsibilities as representatives of the university in international contexts, to introduce them to the logistics and practicalities of the programme, and a country-specific briefing. They were required to maintain a reflective journal, but there were no opportunities for the pre-service teachers to engage with concepts that may have helped them to think differently about the context they were about to visit, or how to understand it, and their attitudes towards it. Furthermore, in order to meet accrediting body requirements, the accompanying university academic was required to take up the role of practicum supervisor. It could be argued, this positioned the cooperating teachers as incapable of fulfilling the role, thus

contributing to a deficit discourse about education in the Solomon Islands. While during pre-departure seminars there was some discussion about the need to learn from cooperating teachers, they were, in effect, written out of the narrative of professional experience in the Solomon Islands from the beginning.

Although the pre-service teachers generally viewed the Solomon Islands' education system as inferior to their own, there were signs that some were able to think more deeply about their experiences, taking account of the context and their positioning within it. In particular, Melanie and Fiona, two mature-age students, seemed to use the interviews after the practicum as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Both were able to identify the Western influence in the Solomon Islands education system. Melanie expressed it thus:

I think the system is very much an English or a Western based system. They're not teaching perhaps within the context of their own culture, and so that makes learning even more difficult for the students. The curriculum isn't necessarily embedded in the way students learn.

In a similar vein, Fiona (an experienced teacher enrolled in a graduate degree) identified a separation between home and school in terms of Solomon Islands' culture saying that home was where culture was maintained while "school was the 'white' way". These deeper and more insightful reflections were part of the second round of interviews conducted about a year after the experience.

The pre-service teachers also recognised that they were positioned by their cooperating teachers as having superior knowledge and skills. During the first interview, Belinda said: "*They had kind of faith in you because you were Australian, which was... they shouldn't but they did, yeah. They trusted you*". She goes on to comment on the experience and knowledge of her cooperating teacher saying, "*It was as though she thought I knew more than her when really she knew heaps more than*

me". Fiona said: *"She [her cooperating teacher] looked up to me, which I didn't like. I do think overall we were well respected more because we were white than because we were professionals to start off with"*. Elsewhere, one of the authors has suggested teaching experiences in developing countries need to be accompanied by opportunities for pre-service teachers to "interrogate the assumptions that underpin their beliefs and actions. This will, by necessity, require them to critique their own positioning as members of the white hegemonic 'mainstream'" (Santoro 2014, p. 441). There was much more that could have been done within the programme to enable this and encourage pre-service teachers to critically analyse the ways they were being positioned, and why. This requires reflexivity, an openness and willingness to engage with alternative perspectives and an ability to listen, ask questions and learn from the 'other'.

The second round of interviews with the pre-service teachers explored how cooperating teachers could be positioned to take a more active supervision role. Fiona and Belinda believed that this was possible, but said it would need structure and support. Their suggestions included professional development about how to critically assess the pre-service teachers and how to give constructive feedback. Melanie also believed that the cooperating teachers could and should take on supervision but felt they were discouraged from doing so because *"they probably don't get support from their government the way we do, as in ongoing professional development"*. Evelyn and Belinda identified the potential for a greater level of reciprocity in the exchange between pre-service and cooperating teachers. Evelyn commented, *"They have so much knowledge about structured teaching that we don't have as pre-service teachers... the associates could show, and then you practice it"*.

These shifts in the pre-service teachers' ways of talking about their experiences are indicative of the tensions in their perceptions of education in the Solomon Islands. This space potentially offers opportunities to challenge deficit constructions, a point to which we return later in the discussion.

Cooperating teacher complicity and resistance

In the same way that the pre-service teachers held contradictory views about teaching and learning in the Solomons, so did the cooperating teachers and principals. On the one hand, there was evidence of complicity in the deficit discourse about Solomon's education; and on the other hand, there was a sense of resistance by the cooperating teachers as they described their professionalism.

Some of the older participants, particularly those who had been taught by expatriate teachers, saw the loss of the expat community in the Solomon Islands as the cause of decline in the education system. David, the secondary school principal said, *"We would like, there was the talk of having all white ex-pats coming back to Uniting College. That is the general feeling because when the school started here it was all expatriates and so when the thing went down there was this call from the church, 'Why can't we have these people coming back?'"*.

Beatrice, a teacher at the secondary school said: *"In the Solomons we normally [see] whites as someone very higher than us"*. A feeling echoed by David, her principal: *"... especially the teachers from Australia, or from an ex-pat teacher, it gives some kind of big, ... like this kind of very high respect, very high respect and high regard for teachers from ex-pats, white ex-pats, because of your knowledge and of your skills"*. It seemed that merely by virtue of being white and from Australia, the pre-service teachers were accorded respect that they had not necessarily earned. James, a primary school principal also seemed to value what the pre-service teachers had to offer: *"We need more of these new insights and contributions where new people will bring into our school"*. It seemed that the Solomon's teachers, viewed whatever the pre-service teachers did as better than what the local teachers could do. This is despite the fact that the pre-service teachers were in only the second or third year of their programme and thus very inexperienced, while many of the cooperating teachers were highly experienced.

This complicity in the construction of deficit discourses about Solomon Islands education and teaching was also apparent in the reluctance of the cooperating teachers to be observed and to give feedback about teaching to the pre-service teachers. Melanie summed it up in her reflective journal:

The associate teachers are reluctant to give us any professional assistance and I think this is because they are aware of the difference which exists in the level of education they have had compared to us. Some of the teachers have attended higher education however some have had no formal teacher training and therefore lack the confidence to offer advice.

Evelyn reported that her cooperating teacher “was reluctant to do that really constructive kind of critique and feedback”, while Belinda said, “she never gave me any negative feedback” adding, “it’s almost as though they’re scared to give you that”. McKenzie and Fitzsimmons (2010) made similar findings in a study focusing on an international practicum in Fiji. They described the Fijian teachers as “warm, hospitable and supportive [but] reluctant to assume responsibility for active supervision” (p. 46). The authors speculate that this may have been due to the Fijian teachers’ considering themselves as underqualified compared to the Australian pre-service teachers. Similarly, while the lack of teaching qualifications amongst some of the Solomon Islands cooperating teachers may have been a factor in their reluctance to provide critical feedback, it is also possible that some may have felt that their English was not good enough to give detailed feedback or complete written observations. Another explanation for the cooperating teachers’ reticence to be observed and teach in front of the pre-service teachers is revealed in the following quote:

When you people come you are new to us. We see you people and we also feel frightened to give some things to people like you might not like it, like our culture. Like this, but we just try our best. (Pamela, cooperating teacher)

This echoes Belinda’s comment and suggests the tacit and unspoken discourse of Western superiority undermined the local teachers’ self confidence that they had something worthwhile to offer the Australian pre-service teachers.

However, the cooperating teachers and principals also described the encouragement and help they provided the pre-service teachers, such as showing them “a Solomon Island way of teaching”, the text books, the way tests and exams are done, talking about the syllabus, cultural and traditional activities, and so on. Primary principal James summed it up, “I’m pretty sure these three [pre-service teachers] have learnt a lot from us here and how we go about things in teaching”. Furthermore, the more experienced teachers expressed a confidence that they could more actively supervise the pre-service teachers. For example, Pamela said:

I think it’s good to do it [get local teachers to act as ATs], because we would like to observe too how they teach and because this is in the Solomons, so we can also help them, like anything we see that not really apply to Solomon Island we can help them, ... I think it would be better. It’s nice for us to observe and see how we can help them too in the class. Or we can learn new things from them too.

David, her principal, agreed saying, “*It would be very helpful, [to] give some kind of responsibility to the local teacher.*” It is incumbent on the university to develop international practicum programmes that intentionally and consistently work on developing partnerships that share power, decision making, and the supervision of pre-service teachers.

In the next section, we make recommendations to improve how international practicum programmes are designed and implemented, and how to build relationships characterised by greater levels of collaboration and reciprocity.

Discussion and conclusions

The extent to which binaries such as developed/undeveloped and superior/inferior were embedded in the thinking of all parties in the practicum partnership and the organisation of the practicum placement programme, is troubling. There was no real expectation that the cooperating teachers would offer any formalised feedback to the pre-service teachers. Indeed, they were discouraged

from doing so because of the presence of the university supervisor who explicitly took on this task. Therefore, the cooperating teachers were not trained to undertake this role, nor were they provided with paperwork such as observation sheets, as would usually be the case. In retrospect, the cooperating teachers appeared marginalised from the entire feedback process, which impacted on the kind of relationships possible between pre-service teachers and host teachers.

In this article, we have highlighted how the relationship between the university, its pre-service teachers and staff, and the Solomon Islands cooperating teachers, principals and schools inadvertently reinforced unequal power relations. This allowed the pre-service teachers to judge education in the Solomon Islands by Western standards, rather than trying to understand how the teachers were positioned within their own social and educational structures, and how they negotiated these. While there is a great deal of potential for international practicum experiences to support collaborative professional learning between cooperating teachers, pre-service teachers and university supervisors, careful planning and negotiation is required to ensure that this is a reciprocal and empowering experience, rather than a re-colonising experience.

In order to achieve a genuine partnership, cooperating teachers need to be repositioned beyond being just the 'classroom placeholder' as described by Clarke, Triggs and Nielsen (2014). Rather, they need to be seen and positioned as active and confident supervisors of pre-service teachers. There are a number of ways this could be achieved. First, an important step in achieving this might be for all members of the partnership – cooperating teachers, pre-service teachers, and programme leader — to come to agreement about their role and their expectations of each other. In this way there is the potential for *all* members of the learning community (Lave and Wenger 1991) to be positioned as legitimate learners and teachers, and thus, the power imbalance between them, can be reduced. Furthermore, the university supervisor is well placed to facilitate the necessary professional learning conversations about the local context, differences and similarities between the host context and the preservice teachers' home context in terms of curriculum, children's learning

preferences, and appropriate ways to seek and receive feedback. These conversations may assist cooperating teachers understand the unique contribution they can make as professionals to the learning experiences of the preservice teachers. Supporting materials such as observation schedules for both cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers, highlighting core classroom practices and prompting subsequent discussion between all members of the practicum triad, can position cooperating teachers as collaborators and partners in professional experiences that emphasise mutual learning for all participants.

Second, better preparation of pre-service teachers prior to departure for an international practicum experience in a developing country may contribute to genuine partnerships, in which different knowledge practices and perspectives are valued, both for their relevance to the local context, but also for their potential to enhance the professional learning of the preservice teachers themselves. This pre-departure preparation needs to include concepts such as culture – including one’s own cultural understandings and positioning, white privilege, intercultural competence – including the culture and styles of communication of the practicum setting, colonisation, relations of power and their ongoing effects in developing countries, and strategies and skills in reflecting on critical incidents.

Finally, there is a need for a clearly structured process enabling pre-service teachers to develop skills of reflection and reflexivity in relation to the international experience. It was in the post-experience interviews that many of the participants were able to think more deeply and critically about their experiences, and thus gain greater benefit from them. Regular opportunities for reflective conversations during the practicum experience would further the aim of developing a learning community in which all members of the triad were positioned as effective professionals. In order to disrupt the tendency to position the developing world in need of help, rescuing, enlightenment or empowerment (Santoro, 2014), genuine partnerships and shared responsibility for practicum supervision in developing countries is a step towards building relationships that are

“beyond coercion, subjugation, and epistemic violence” (Andreotti, 2011, p. 17). Only then, is it likely that international teaching programmes in developing countries, will maximize their potential to contribute to the preparation of teachers who are reflexive, interculturally competent, responsive to, and respectful of difference and diversity.

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