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## **Maximising Intercultural Learning in Short Term International Placements: Findings Associated with Orientation Programs, Guided Reflection and Immersion**

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*Abstract: Short-term international practicum experience is now a feature of many university education programs in Australia in an attempt to engage students with the growing multi-cultural aspects of Australian life. The stated purposes of such practicum experiences generally highlight intercultural learning, which is associated with the development of intercultural sensitivity, cultural identity, global citizenship and global competence. This paper tracks and documents the early and developing attitudes and dispositions of a group of pre-service teachers (PSTs) and academic staff who were engaged with the pilot project of a pre-service placement in Malaysian secondary schools. The behaviours associated with intercultural learning are observed in association with the students' responses to changing circumstances. The paper draws attention to lessons learnt about orientation for intercultural exchanges in the development of intercultural learning and suggests ways to enhance the development of intercultural understandings and minimize cultural difference through more targeted interventions.*

### **Introduction**

Cultural diversity is now an established feature of Australian schools and universities with the advent of population mobility through migration, relocation and refugee movements. We are no longer insulated from cultural differences as we encounter culturally different people in every realm of our lives. Yet “intercultural sensitivity does not come naturally as we seek to ignore, copy or destroy difference” (Olsen & Kroeger, 2001, p.117). In discussing culture, we have adopted a definition from Dunkley (2009, p.1) who describes culture as “the framework and substance of a social group that comprises its activity, traditions, values, rules, identity and beliefs”.

Not surprisingly, *Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia* is now a cross curricula priority in the mandatory Australian Curriculum taught in schools, bringing with it an imperative for teacher education institutions to prepare teachers with the skills and attitudes appropriate to manage this. A number of research projects have involved establishing ways in which this can be done (Ochoa, 2010), with various options involving exposure to culturally relevant students while studying at home (Soria & Troisi, 2014), to immersion programs in Asian countries. Internationally, universities and schools are increasingly turning to international experience to foster the development of intercultural learning and sensitivity (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Dunkley, 2009). Within Faculties of Education, where the training of teachers occurs, there has been the development of international practicums, where pre-service teachers (PSTs) spend several weeks in an international setting, teaching in classrooms which are significantly different to those of their home country.

Research demonstrates that immersion alone may not provide the stimulus needed for learning, with a need for careful attention to be given to the pre and post management of such

programs (Chinnappan, 2013). Santoro & Major (2012) conducted research, which indicated the need for pre departure orientation programs which help students define themselves culturally and consider the impact of cultural difference on their comfort and learning in the upcoming experience. Further findings involve the significance of reflection on the experience post placement. The move towards active reflection on learning is located within the constructivist learning movement (Van Berge, 2007, p.396).

This paper describes an international practicum where a group of Australian students undertook a short-term placement in Malaysian schools as part of their teacher education program. The research aims to explore the PSTs' changing intercultural understandings through tracking their attitudes from the initial application through to the early immersion in the Malaysian school system. The research focuses on indicators of initial adjustment to cultural change and seeks to understand its relationship with both pre-departure and in-country activities.

### **Current Research and the Global Education Experience**

The link between global education experience and the development of global competence and intercultural sensitivity is currently the subject of a number of research projects with mixed emphasis on the relative importance of initiatives to promote learning. Studies explored as background to this paper varied in the extent to which they focused purely on the value of the experience. Some researchers stress the essential nature of intervention at multiple levels (Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Pence & Macgillivray, 2007; Willard-Holt, 2001) and focus on the value of cultural emersion in promoting learning. Others (Dunkley, 2009; Lutterman-Aguilar, 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2002); Quezada, 2004) recommend some "value adding" in association with preparation, reflection and follow up. However all are in agreement that international study experience itself contributes more powerfully than any other strategy towards the development of intercultural sensitivity and global competence (Willard-Holt, 2001, p.506).

Lutterman-Aguilar (2007) cites research which demonstrates the importance of experiential learning linking experience and reflection. She notes research by Kauffmann, Martin & Weaver (1992) into the numbers of students who study abroad without ever becoming immersed in the local culture or developing an appreciation for lifestyles that differ from their own. Experiential learning is linked to constructivist theories of learning, which describe learning as a process of the assimilation and accommodation of experiences into known schema to modify existing understandings. Through the process of interaction with others and critical reflection on experience, knowledge is constantly constructed and experiences become meaningful as part of that process. Willard-Holt (2001), after conducting a project in Mexico, suggests that further gains in intercultural sensitivity could be made with more extensive preparation to examine preconceptions and an effort to build awareness of specific in-country issues for further exploration. Santora and Major (2012) found that placing students in contexts characterized by uncertainty and dissonance had mixed effects depending on the capacity of the student to adjust. They noted that students who were too far out of their comfort zones seemed not to have had a transformative experience. Recommendations were that in order to promote learning through experience a greater emphasis on pre departure preparation and post experience reflection was needed.

The terms intercultural sensitivity and global competence are frequently used in research associated with outcomes from Study Abroad. Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman (2003 p.422) define the term "intercultural sensitivity" as "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural difference". Intercultural sensitivity is required so that a person is able to act

with global competence, which is measured through the effectiveness of a person's involvement in another culture- through showing interest, observing cultural differences and displaying the capacity to accommodate this difference through modification of behaviour. Olson & Kroeger (2001, p.117) describe a globally competent person as someone who "has enough substantive knowledge, perceptual understanding, and intercultural communication skills to effectively interact in our globally interdependent world". Substantive knowledge is defined as including (an unspecified amount of) knowledge of cultures, languages, world issues, global dynamics and human choices, all of which are acknowledged as difficult to quantify (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Other qualities of global competence are grouped under headings of "perceptual understanding" and "intercultural communication" (Olson & Kroeger, 2001, p.118). Such qualities include the capacity for avoiding stereotyping and a capacity for empathy with other cultural positions. Another researcher, Hunter (2004, p. 130-131), describes global competence as "having an open mind, while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside one's environment". In this definition, global competence is a disposition towards behaviours associated with intercultural sensitivity. Dunkley (2009) while utilizing definitions of both global competence and intercultural sensitivity by Hunter (2004) and Olson & Kroeger (2001) also notes the significance of culture in forming and framing a person's own perceptions of identity, quoting from Bennett, (1993) that culture is fundamental to how we make sense of the world.

Much of the research around intercultural learning draws on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivities (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993). The model describes behaviours and perspectives in response to cultural difference in terms of a series of stages which represent "the ability to construe (and thus experience) cultural difference in more complex ways" (Hammer et.al. 2003, p.243). Bennett (1993) identifies two broad phases. The first is characterized by what is described as an ethnocentric response which involves deliberate isolation from cultural difference and therefore failure to recognize other cultures as entities in their own right. The second phase is described as ethnorelative and is characterized by an acceptance of cultural relativism underpinned by beliefs in the value of other cultures.

An ethnocentric position comes from a world-view of cultural superiority and is summarized as being characterized by attitudes of *Denial*, *Defence* and *Minimisation* (Bennett, 2013). These attitudes are viewed in relation to "understanding resistance to intercultural programming and for resolving developmental issues in the context of exchange" (Bennett, 2013, p.153). In the study abroad situation, *Denial* is associated with the dismissal of cultural topics and knowledge as irrelevant in favour of more practical aspects such as money, security and transport. An attitude of *Defense*, associated with complaints about food and other things culturally different, may define the student experience of the study abroad program. Bennett (2013, p.154) notes the potential for the study abroad experience to itself move a student from an attitude of *Defense* to one of *Minimization* in which elements of one's own world are experienced as universal, thus neutralizing cultural difference. He recommends that students develop and exhibit cultural self-awareness - before being presented with characteristics of other cultures. When confronted with the challenges of involvement in a different culture, students need to consider their ethnocentric views by "engag(ing) with critical cultural reflection" (Marx & Moss, 2011, p.36). Milstein (2005) comments that the feelings of alienation and helplessness which can occur when first confronted by other peoples' cultures, can have a positive effect as a learning experience, for increasing intercultural understanding and for the enhancement of self-efficacy. Students would move through a period of adjustment to the new culture and exhibit *minimization* before starting to move into *acceptance* of cultural differences.

Ethnorelative attitudes are characterized by understanding others in relation to one's own but as existing in parallel. Individuals recognize and accept the fact that one's own culture is one of many world views, which leads to respect for behaviour, values and beliefs in the context of the culture of origin. Cultural difference is both respected and explored for its difference and the characteristic behaviours of this phase are summarized as acceptance, adaption and integration (Bennett, 1993; Olson & Kroeger, 2001). This theoretical base has been widely used in various institutions to facilitate movement within the stages in an effort to establish global and cultural competences, and intercultural sensitivity levels (Westrick & Yuen, C., 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2007). Figure one (following) highlights our interpretation of the relationship of students' cultural adjustment from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (DMIS - as described by Bennett, 1993) and the possible behaviours associated with these. These behaviours were summarized from the research by Hammer et al (2003) and Bennett (2013).

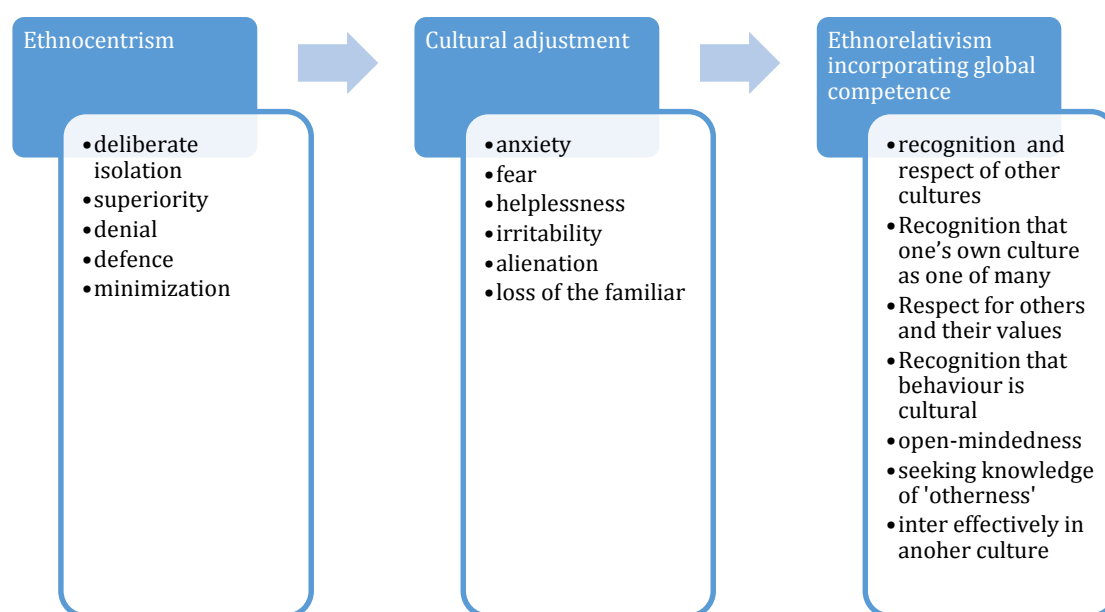


Figure 1 –Behaviours associated with cultural adjustment from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

## Project Background

In 2012, academic staff from five Victorian universities joined ranks to develop the idea of a multi-university practicum for education of pre-service teachers (PSTs) in Malaysia. The original memorandum of understanding was drawn up by academics from Monash University (Tudball & Williams, 2012). The focus of the consortium and the practicum was two-fold: to develop inter-university collaboration around a common need/theme and to assist PSTs to develop intercultural learning through an Australia-Malaysia placement.

After nearly a year of activities which included inter-university meetings, a preliminary visit to Kuala Lumpur and collaborations with staff from the Australian High Commission and Education Institutions in Kuala Lumpur, 16 PSTs from 5 universities participated in the global practicum in early 2013. These students came together at least three times prior to practicum for the purpose of orientation – meeting each other and being given crucial information about the Malaysian culture. A formal selection process was undertaken, which endeavored to select PSTs with professed cultural awareness and sensitivity. Students were asked in their application to comment on themselves as a culturally sensitive person.

## Orientation and other Information Activities

The pre-departure sessions in Australia focussed on allowing students opportunities to meet each other and to find out the more practical aspects of the global experience such as travel, food and appropriate attire for the climate. This especially applied to the first orientation, which was mainly devoted to outlining necessary travel arrangements. Students were also given access to an information booklet, which again reinforced arrangements for travel and gave some indication of the types of accommodation available to them in Malaysia. The pre-departure information also contained information about dress code, explaining that there were variations in Malaysia according to the particular sub-groupings to which Malaysians belong.

DATE	ACTIVITY
August 2012	Selection into the Malaysian global experience
October 2012	First orientation session
November 2012	Second orientation session
Wednesday 9 <sup>th</sup> January 2013	Arrival of PSTs and academic staff in Kuala Lumpur. Orientation to hostel accommodation
Thursday 10 <sup>th</sup> January 2013	Meeting of PSTs, academic staff, supervising teachers, Institutional staff, Australian High Commission staff. Bus trip to local sights.
Friday 11 <sup>th</sup> January 2013	Free day – informal orientation to surroundings and some PSTs visit schools
Monday 14 <sup>th</sup> January	First day of teaching at schools - observation
Tuesday – Friday 15-18 <sup>th</sup> January	First teaching week
Saturday - Sunday 19-20 <sup>th</sup> January	Second cohort of academic staff arrive, first group leave.

**Table 1 – PSTs schedule (abbreviated)**

During the second orientation session, students were given the names of the schools involved and where they would be placed so that they could investigate the school more fully before arriving in Malaysia. This was provided by the project officer and was followed with a presentation of photographs of the accommodation in Malaysia (taken earlier in the year by some of the academic staff involved in the development of the program). Two Malaysian university students spoke about their own experiences as students both in their home country and abroad and participated in the dinner after the session.

On arrival in Malaysia, students were all located in basic accommodation associated with a teaching university, which they shared with Malaysian students. The hostel management briefed all students on expectations and ways of behaving around the hostel. Students were introduced to a group of Malaysian Education students, recently returned from a six-month stay in England. These students were to be the buddies of the Australian students, helping them with orientation to the local culture.

A second information session in-country (orientation) of a more formal nature occurred on the first official day of the practicum. It included mentor teachers from the various schools, university academics from the hosting university and representatives of the Australian High Commission to Malaysia who were part of the organisation of the initiative. The event consisted of a range of formal speeches welcoming participants and concluded with an informal meal where students were able to meet their mentors and prepare for the experience of teaching in the schools. Academic staff also met with the teachers and indicated to them that early visits to the schools would commence after the weekend break. After this meeting, the academic staff members were shown the students' accommodation. A

final orientation activity involved a bus trip with Malaysian buddies, to key areas of the city of Kuala Lumpur and surrounding areas.

The following day was a free day. The timetable had been arranged around this free time to allow students to become accustomed to their new surroundings and to settle into their accommodation. The following Monday, students all presented to their schools and were able to observe classes. Academic staff commenced their school visits.

## **Research Design**

As the research sought to gather information on the lived experiences and perspectives of participants through a number of data sources, a qualitative, ethnographic approach to research design was considered the most appropriate. Ethnography has its roots in social anthropology, where the emphasis is on peoples and culture (Darby, 2002). Ethnography provided an approach for investigating the cultural situation, giving the students the opportunity to explore it for themselves and to communicate to the researchers the meanings of their experiences in the Malaysian culture. The research was situated in the cultural experiences of students and as such was viewed through an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Accordingly, the research data collected were generally that of the personal perspectives of various stakeholders and some documentary records. The quality of data is very important in qualitative studies of this nature, so the researchers were aware that a number of things needed to be considered to enhance the project data. For example, we introduced rigor through the use of multiple sources of information to minimize bias (documentary evidence, interviews, reflexive journals). In addition, we have provided rich descriptions (in this paper) to allow others to make their own judgements of the situations.

In seeking to develop the reliability of our data, we have used detailed accounts and verbatim quotes from a number of recorded interview/discussions, and to improve the validity of our data, the use of triangulation (multiple researchers, a variety of data sources and cross-checking of data) was employed. We have used a theoretical framework, based on Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivities (DMIS - Bennett, 1993), against which to interrogate and analyse our data.

## **Data Sources**

The four data sources used in this research included:

1. Documentation relating to the content of orientation sessions 3 months and 2 months prior to the Malaysian practicum
2. Students' written "Expressions of Interest"- responding to a number of specific questions
3. Academic Reflexive Journals
4. Students' group interview and open discussion session early in the practicum

### **Documentation relating to orientation sessions 3 months and 2 months prior to the Malaysian practicum**

Pre-departure data consisted of documents developed as part of the orientation sessions.

These documents include:

- The Agendas for both Orientation Session One and Orientation Session Two – both held prior to departure. For example, the agenda for the first 90 minute session included: Welcome and overview of the practicum; Introductions and why we want to be involved;

Overview of Malaysia and KL; Essential information (dates and itinerary, accommodation with some images, budget, extra activities); What students need to do (book tickets, insurance, visa); Question and answers

- Global Experience: Malaysia Information booklet. A booklet of approximately 10 pages which provided students with information regarding the practicum and details about the schools and country they were visiting.

This data set was used to appraise and make judgments on the topics and information provided to the students prior to travel to Malaysia.

#### **Students' written "Expressions of Interest"- responding to a number of specific questions**

This data comprised of students' written "Expressions of Interest" provided prior to selection into the program. In applying to take part in the program, students were asked to write about why they were choosing to participate in this program and their perceptions of themselves as culturally sensitive people. Four responses were chosen as being typical of the data.

The questions addressed were:

1. Why do you want to be part of this practicum experience in Malaysia?
2. Comment on yourself as a culturally sensitive person?
3. Comment with evidence as to how you would rate your abilities to be part of a group of 15 university students working and living together in hostel accommodation for 4 weeks?

#### **Academic Reflexive Journals**

Academic Reflexive Journals from the two academic staff involved in the development of the practicum and attending the first week of the Malaysian practicum, were written recordings and reflections of daily occurrences. These were undertaken independently of each other, but used in post-practicum discussions on the elements of the practicum. Each journal provided a diarized account of what each academic did during the day, where they went and with whom they met. The diaries included their impressions of the circumstances surrounding the PSTs, the schools and the responses to PSTs issues across a 10 day period which included the arrival of the PSTs and the first week of their practicum in Malaysian schools. The roles of the academic staff were to liaise and to work with the school principals and teaching staff to ensure all requirements of a formal practicum were met; to meet PSTs regularly out-of-school to allow debriefing; to work with PSTs in creating culturally appropriate lessons; to attend each school and view PSTs teaching.

#### **Students' group interview and open discussion session early in the practicum**

A PSTs' group interview was conducted at the end of the first day of the placement. It was a semi-structured interview around a number of ideas: the value of previous orientation sessions, early arrival at the destination, the observation period in schools, what differences/similarities were observed in schools, students' perceptions of their developing intercultural understanding, aspects such as communication, student expectations, accommodation and other matters raised



In addition to the specific focuses above, the PST discussion moved into other areas of interest to them – identified in the data. The interview was conducted at the place of residence which was basic hostel accommodation shared with Malaysian students also studying at the associated university. The interview was recorded and transcribed.

The importance of these data relates to the fact that they actually articulate the challenges and dispositions of the PSTs prior to, and at the commencement of their development towards intercultural sensitivity and cultural competence. Too often data are taken at the end of a program and do not always capture the intricacies of early experiences which lead to the development of greater intercultural sensitivities.

## **Research Data, Analysis and Discussion**

The stated aim of this research is to explore the PSTs' changing intercultural understandings through tracking their attitudes from the initial application through to the early immersion in the cultural context of teaching in Malaysian schools. The initial review of the data provided a range of emergent themes, which were then linked back to indicators of developing intercultural competence. We use these indicators to interrogate both pre-departure and in-country activities. Accordingly data will be utilized to achieve these aims through grouping findings under the following themes:

- Ethnocentric and ethnorelative attitudes,
- Student responses to orientation programs,

### **Ethnocentric and ethnorelative attitudes**

As indicated in Figure 1, some of the suggested characteristics of ethnocentrism include; deliberate isolation, superiority, denial, defence and minimisation. We searched the data to locate evidence of any of these characteristics being displayed by students participating in the program.

Student data, arising from the initial written applications, contained some evidence that students were at least mindful that they were undertaking a placement in a culturally different context from that with which they were familiar. Most described themselves as culturally sensitive without expanding on the implications. However their responses lack evidence that they have reflected at any depth on the notions of culture as a phenomena relative to but different from their own. The experience was most consistently viewed as “an adventure” or an “opportunity”. “The opportunity to participate in this cross border-teaching program is one I would define to be truly invaluable.” (Student R, Aug 2012).

All students commented on the opportunity to learn another country's curriculum and ways of operating. They indicated this would broaden both their understandings and their teaching skills. There was acknowledgement of the challenge of this; “I feel this practicum will offer a challenge...” (Student A, Aug 2012). Student R (Aug 2012) reflected that “...teaching in Malaysia would allow me ...to be challenged by a new and exciting work environment ...” Some of the students commented on the positive aspects of working with students from another university and the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences as well as their own. Student R (Aug 2012) comments, “The chance to work alongside fellow student teachers from a range of universities provides an exciting and important platform to develop networks with like- minded students”. Overall the initial data obtained from student applications indicated that there was a general sense that this would be a valuable opportunity to be immersed in another culture and to learn from this experience.

These initial data implied that students were receptive to cultural learning and were acknowledging the desirability of ethnorelative attitudes.

This was to an extent supported by comments in the academic journals: Academic B noted at the end of Day 2- prior to the commencement of teaching placement that “all students seemed excited and coping well enough” and “all the students happily chatted to [other academic] and myself on the tour” (activity arranged for them along with their buddies). Academic A however, noted “After the formal gathering we visited the students in the accommodation. Neat, clean, adequate, although apparently some students were a little shocked at the basic nature of the accommodation.”

The students’ comments indicate that they were aware that they would be confronting issues in relation to being in a different culture, but all stated that they expected this would be a positive experience as they were interested in learning through their participation. On commenting on cultural sensitivity, Student J (Aug 2012) states, “I do not always understand why different cultures do things differently, but I am happy and eager to learn.” It is therefore significant that following on from the orientation sessions, students strongly aligned with attitudes associated with *Defence* and *Denial* when confronted with the reality of a different culture, at least in the early days of the project. This contrast between pre-departure attitudes (indicating intercultural sensitivity) and explicitly expressed ethnocentric comments in the first few days, possibly has implications for the structure and nature of pre-departure orientation sessions, which will be discussed later in this paper.

At the subsequent group interview conducted two days later, after PSTs had spent a day in schools but had not commenced teaching, PSTs commented on the problematic issues of finding the hostel from the airport; the conditions of the hostel including air-conditioners not working and cold showers; difficulties finding food, the inappropriate allocation of bedrooms and the bringing of unsuitable clothing and footwear for school use (Student interview, 14 Jan).

...we hadn’t really had a grounding exercise here amongst us on the university side of it so as to just even touching base like “how was the flight?”, “how’s the accommodation going?”, “do you have everything you need?” because rather than asking (inaudible) I’m not really sure but it’s a bit hard to know where we go for domestic issues here in the hostel.

(Student interview, 14 Jan).

There was general or implied agreement that the students’ issues should have or could have been solved by lecturers coming early, staying at the same accommodation, and sorting these things out for the students beforehand. Students in this discussion did not acknowledge any assistance by the provision of the contact telephone numbers of two staff from the Australian High Commission, or the fact that these same staff greeted students on the first night of their arrival and provided a social meeting. Students expressed the view that the Hostel Management staff should have welcomed them more appropriately. Students also said that it would have been useful to have had the academic staff stay at the hostel to assist in the solving of their problems. Overall this data indicated a lack of depth or comprehension from the initial willingness to adapt in culturally sensitive ways to another culture. Attitudes associated with *Defence* and *Denial* (Bennett, 1993) were also prevalent in responses to a second focus group question about differences and similarities that had been noticed. Students tended to be somewhat critical of the Malaysian classrooms in that they commented that the teaching approaches were less engaging than in Australian schools – the teachers’ having their backs to the class, writing on the board, and long discussions. There was no evidence of placing their observations in a cultural context or trying to understand it

differently from their own experience of working in the Australian context. One PST commented, "It's just the standard of teaching, I was told I was going to do whole numbers in secondary and then I went there and I was like 'oh it's pretty basic compared to what we do.'" (Student Interview, 14 Jan 2013). There was general agreement that the teaching approaches, which they felt lacked interactivity and engagement, were contributing to what they considered as lower standards. Overall students showed a tendency to generalise from early observations and judge from an ethnocentric cultural position.

Students commented on some issues of what they perceived as poor communication. "They're looking at us to know what's going on and we're looking to them, probably for support" (Student interview, 14 Jan 2013). There was a level of discomfort in that there was some initial confusion about what PSTs would be teaching. The program appeared to be poorly understood in the schools. Initially they were puzzled by not being able to visit other classrooms until informed that other teachers were intimidated by the PSTs presence. The PSTs seemed to understand this and were sensitive to their Malaysian teacher's needs. Some students were disgruntled about not teaching within their method area and about not having clear curriculum expectations. However, again, the PSTs seemed able to accommodate this level of confusion and discomfort. They were surprised to realise that they (PST's) were perceived as experts who should/must only see the best teaching in the school. One student expressed the idea that they had already learnt that "yes" may not always mean "yes" which might explain why people in Malaysia agree to something without understanding it. A student commented that this "might be an intercultural lesson for us", indicating a shift towards more culturally sensitive understandings.

Interview data indicated that students were appreciative of the effort of their Malaysian supervisors and were starting to recognise different cultural norms in Malaysia. There was some level of cultural sensitivity being displayed here, by some of the students who were generally enthusiastic about their experiences on the first day. The practical aspects of seeing how classes were run were associated with feeling more comfortable. It appeared that students were gaining more knowledge of the setting into which they would be immersed. The knowledge was of significance in allowing them to start making adjustments to their expectations and prior knowledge. With reference to Bennett's model for intercultural development (1993), data demonstrate that students in the sample entered the program with attitudes either associated with or conducive to the development of ethnorelativism. However, attitudes relating to ethnocentrism were clearly obvious during the first few days. While this default to ethnocentric behaviours and attitudes seemed an overwhelmingly negative response to the early experiences of cultural immersion there were simultaneously glimpses of positive responses. Students appeared to oscillate, demonstrating behavior related to both ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. In the group interview, students acknowledged that they were increasing their understandings through their developing relationships with their buddies and through opportunities to talk with Muslim people to understand their practices. One PST noted that he was, "... seeing Muslim Malaysians and being able to talk directly to them and discuss things, basic things like praying five times a day unless you're working or some other excuse, so starting an understanding of Islam." (Student interview, 14 Jan). They commented that they felt that this should also impact on intercultural understanding in Australia. Other comments related to them developing a greater insight into the reality of the cultural situation in Malaysia with three distinct ethnic groups, "because we are foreigners". They discussed both the attitudes to females raised in a predominately male environment as well as their own sense of unease when walking alone as a single female. The discussion around this question was generally positive for students' perceptions that even at this early stage, cultural difference was being observed and respected.

Direct interaction with the community (teachers, school students, hostel staff, university buddies), whilst challenging, provided PSTs with the most accurate information on how to proceed. Lutterman-Aguilar (2007, quoting from Kolb, 1984) states that “in order to transform experience into knowledge, learners must begin with their own concrete experience, then engage in reflective observation, move to abstract conceptualization and then to active experimentation of the concepts” (p.3). The first few days had provided the PSTs with the concrete experience. Their subsequent discussions with each other and the academic staff provided opportunity for reflective observation, but much more was needed to move the students to a fuller ethnorelative position.

#### **Data associated with student response to orientation programs**

Feedback on the usefulness or otherwise of pre-departure and in country orientation programs was contained in data from the group interview. The orientation sessions held in Australia pre-departure, had focused on “the endless logistics syndrome” (Bennett, 2013) rather than an effort to engage students in reflection on their own culture and comparisons with other cultures (Mahon and Cushner, 2010). The documents provided to the PSTs during the orientation programs, along with the content of the sessions, did not require PSTs to engage in any form of critical reflection on their own culture or consider cultures in relation to their own. Pre-service teachers expressed views that the orientations in Australia did not help them in any way or they felt that what had been discussed was completely irrelevant. “... the ones back in Australia, when we arrived half of the stuff they told us either didn’t happen or was completely irrelevant.” (Student 3, Interview, 14 Jan 2013).

The pre-departure orientation sessions were constructed to cover matters important to travel and some introductory information about Malaysia and cultural expectations (such as attire for males and females). Students were provided with practical instructions on the student hostel, including living quarters (see page 8), the city they would be living in, food, and other basic information. In relation to the pre-departure orientations sessions, PSTs were very critical of the content, indicating that that the only value they gained from them was in meeting the other students prior to travel. “...to meet other people yes but not anything else” (Student 4, Interview, 14 Jan 2013).

Student data tends to support the contention that the most effective orientation sessions involved cultural immersion rather than talking about future events. Students rapidly adjusted to their accommodation when forced to live with local students whose cultural responses were positive. (Academic A, Jan 10, 2013). Immersion in the school cultures resulted in rapid adjustment and broadening of understanding about cultural difference in a positive, respectful way.

The orientation in Malaysia on the Thursday prior to the school visit where the students met their supervisors and other Malaysian students was rated as very helpful. “...the first two days here was really helpful in getting more comfortable about what we’re doing, talking to the teachers, just saying ‘what do you want us to do’.” (Student 1, Interview 14 Jan 2013). “The ones we had here were really good quality and very good to talk to some of the Malaysian students about things that happen here and talk to the teachers” (Student 2, Interview 14 Jan 2013). The Malaysian buddies paved the way and ensured less discomfort. The PSTs seemed to see them as very credible as a source of information. Overall, the discussion around the value of orientation sessions pointed to the following conclusion (which link in with discussions about the development of intercultural sensitivity). It seemed that the PSTs had difficulty absorbing cultural information before the immersion experience –there was a limited understanding and tolerance for pre-departure information of the nature

provided. As suggested by Willard-Holt (2001) and others, the orientations sessions could have incorporated more opportunities for reflection on cultural matters.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to explore early data indicating cultural awareness and the development of inter-cultural sensitivity in students embarking on an intercultural teaching placement. The research seeks to understand its relationship with both pre-departure and in-country activities.

The PSTs' responses to intercultural challenges, at the very beginning of their participation in the program have been highlighted. Themes emerged through the initial review of the data which were then linked back to indicators of developing intercultural competence. Using the figure created earlier in this paper, we searched for identifying behaviours which would fit the categories we were looking for (Ethnocentric through Cultural Adjustment to Ethnorelative). In the pre-departure data, students identified themselves as being culturally 'sensitive'. This open-mindedness, if true, could be considered an element of an ethnorelative approach to intercultural competence – being prepared, at least in words, to respect another culture.

On arrival in Malaysia, students were confronted with a number of challenges. At first, it seemed as if they had risen to these challenges and had overcome feelings associated with cultural adjustment, anxiety, helplessness, loss of the familiar and alienation. However, comments during the interview, reveal that students were not as comfortable with the situation as was first thought. The students were demonstrating elements of adjustment to a new culture through feelings of helplessness (being unable to control their direct environment), and disenfranchisement from their familiar contexts. Adjustments of this nature are often the trigger for students to reflect on their experience and start to move forward (Milstein, 2005).

The interview on the first day of their practicum revealed that many students demonstrated an ethnocentric response to their situation (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). During the interview in Malaysia, their responses were indicative of a lack of the substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding. This lack is in contradiction to the qualities associated with a globally competent person. The initial orientation information was described as irrelevant and subsequently many students completely disregarded the advice provided and were in disrespect of local cultures and customs. It is difficult to determine if the students just did not fully understand the ramifications of their behaviour or whether they were behaving ethnocentrically without appreciation of the impact of their behaviour on local people. Perhaps, at this stage, they lacked empathy with other cultural positions or the perceptual understanding characterized in globally competent people (Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

The orientation sessions in Australia clearly failed to engage students with issues of cultural awareness appropriate to support their transition into the culturally different program (Bennett, 2013; Lutterman-Aguilar, 2007, Willard-Holt, 2001). However it is evident that other factors associated with guided reflection on the new cultural context subsequently had a positive impact. The main impact on cultural attitude shift was identified in student interactions with the buddies, students' relationship with their mentors, and immersion in general- in living and working under the same conditions as their Malaysian buddies. The students exhibited some characteristics of ethnorelative behaviour when they communicated with their student buddies and teachers and adapted their behaviour in light of what they were learning.

Across the first nine days of the Global Experience Malaysia, students exhibited characteristics in line with ethnocentrism as well as ethnorelativism. Often they moved back and forth between these two states, as they attempted to accommodate new ways of operating and new information. We realised that the process of becoming culturally sensitive is not linear; it is far more complex than the DMIS model proposed. Many of the examples we have shown, highlight the iterative nature of developing intercultural sensitivity.

However it is significant that on day 4, the following comment was written, “Most indicated that they were getting on really well and were quite cheerful.” (Academic B, Jan 14 2013). The behaviours associated with ethnorelativism were occurring more frequently, with episodes of ethnocentric behaviour occurring less frequently. We perceive that in the development of intercultural sensitivity students will move between positions as their experiences of immersion consolidate. Development depends on preparation sessions, immersion and cultural challenges, concrete experience, interaction with cultural others and much reflection on what is happening.

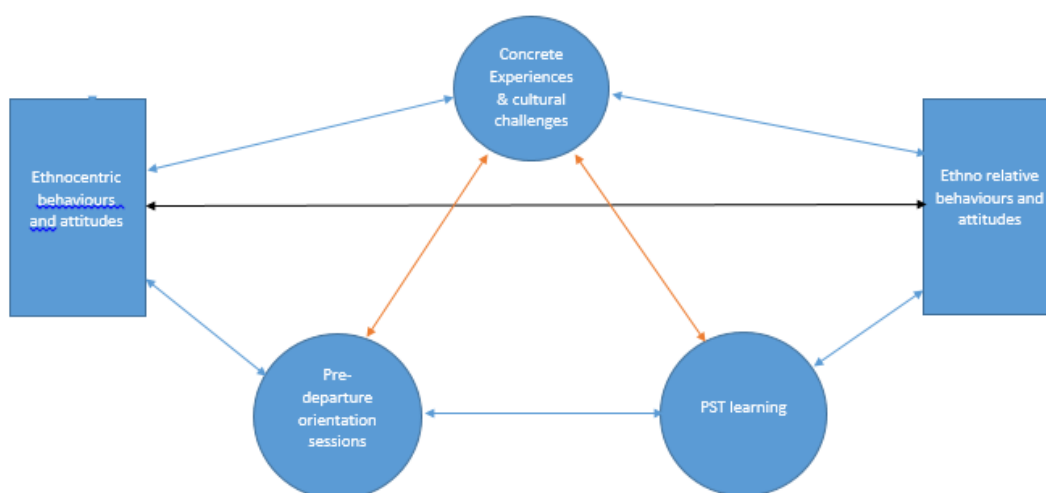


Figure 2 – Processes to Enhance Ethnorelative Behaviours and Attitudes

## Implications and Recommendations

There is no evidence that the preparation (orientations sessions), prior to the experience, actually prepared the PSTs for the new experiences. This finding highlights research which suggests that it is “structured preparation” that aids students’ intercultural sensitivity (Dunkley, 2009; Lutterman-Aguilar, 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Quezada, 2004). It is now apparent that the structured preparation needs to include opportunities to reflect on one’s own culture and identify possible challenges associated with cultural adjustment before embracing notions of other cultures and the impact of experiencing cultural difference. Data indicated that the experience of immersion with Malaysian buddies and school mentors as a context for reflecting on culture and cultural difference created a context for students to reflect on their cultural limitations. The interview itself may have acted as a form of reflection as the academic staff questioned and challenged students to try to think differently, particularly when negative views were being espoused.

Our research indicates that the preparation (orientation) of the type these students received is not valuable in terms of developing intercultural sensitivity. For intercultural sensitivity to develop, the students attending global experience programs, even for short

periods of time, possibly need several experiences and challenges. These include structured orientation sessions where PSTs engage with ideas of their own culture before thinking about other cultures. The concrete experiences, which occur through immersion in another culture can enhance their empathy and appreciation of “otherness” and cultural difference.

Opportunities for guided reflection and interaction with locals, across the time of the practicum, also aid in the development of intercultural sensitivity. Post-practicum sessions are also seen as crucial to the de-briefing of students. Figure 2 depicts the interaction of elements required for movement towards ethnorelative behaviours and attitudes. All of the above components, when enacted as part of a global experience program will aid in the movement of students’ attitudes and behaviours from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative approach and improve students’ intercultural sensitivity.

At this point in time, the orientation sessions related to the Malaysian: Global Experience have changed. Prior to the practicum, students have been given the opportunity to discuss their own culture and reflect on cultural identities and well as those of the Malaysian environment. Data is currently being collected to detail whether this intervention during the pre-departure orientation is aiding PSTs to develop greater cultural sensitivity and to move with more ease to an ethnorelative position, thus maximizing the potential for short term programs to have successful outcomes.

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