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Running head: NESB STUDENTS AND FIELD EXPERIENCE

**A Program for Preparing Ethnic Minority Student Teachers for Practicum**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents information on the perceived concerns and challenges of non English speaking background (NESB) students prior to and during teaching practicum. Whilst NESB student teachers perceived similar anxieties about practicum to their peers, they also confront language, communication and cultural differences which may hinder their successful completion of field experiences in schools. In an attempt to increase completion rates, programs designed to build confidence and teaching skills of NESB student teachers have been identified. The present paper describes the development and implementation of such a program funded at an Australian university.

**Keywords:** NESB student teachers; practicum, stressors, support program.

## **Australia needs culturally diverse teachers**

A challenge facing education in Australia today is addressing the needs of a growing diversity of students from a variety of different cultures and languages (Iredale, 1997). According to Education Queensland (2003), 6.9% of students in Queensland schools are non-English speaking background (NESB) and 10% of Queenslanders over five years-old speak a language other than English at home. Indeed, children attend their local area schools as a way to become assimilated quickly into the established Queensland school culture (Osborne & Dawes, 1992). As the population of NESB students is expected to increase in schools, reflecting the overall trend of global human movement and the growth in Australia's population (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1999; McDade, 2006), it becomes increasingly important that teachers have a developed sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity. One way to address this issue is to recruit a more culturally diverse teaching force.

While recruiting a culturally diverse teaching force may bring many benefits to the country, there is a danger that the engagement may become uni-directional (Marginson, 2002). That is, rather than seeking out what teachers from other cultures can offer to enhance education in Australia, the trend seems to be that migrants to Australia are the ones who must adjust, with Australians offering little flexibility for accommodating these newcomers. Swetnam (2003) suggested that Australia must make a concerted effort to recruit teachers who have been trained in other countries and are now living in Australia and/or must make an effort to recruit second-generation Australians. However, the situation is not simple.

While recruiting teachers from overseas might be a solution, teachers who have trained in other countries may not have their qualifications recognised in Australia so they must be trained again to be registered to work in Australia. This situation brings with it its own problems. NESB teacher trainees may experience discrimination based on their accents or appearance. Teacher trainees may be unfamiliar with and/or uncomfortable with the teaching approaches in Australia that differ from what they knew in their home countries; they may find the challenge of managing student behaviour discouraging (less-formal, seemingly less respectful towards teachers than in their home cultures) to the point where they abandon their pursuit of a career in teaching (Swetnam, 2003). Swetnam recommends that teacher retraining (and indeed teacher training) courses need to focus more on English language skills development, developing behaviour management skills appropriate to the Australian school context, as well as, focus on curriculum content as practiced in Australian schools.

## **Field Experience for NESB students**

It has been long recognised that many pre-service teachers experience high levels of stress in relation to their teaching practicum (Clement, 1999; Enz, 1997; Sanderson, 2003; Tibble, 1959). Such stress is not exclusive to NESB students but appears to be across the range of teacher trainees. Parsons

(1973) suggested that stress and anxiety will decrease as knowledge and skills develop during teacher training. Nonetheless, while this increased self-confidence has been shown to apply to most pre-service students, studies suggest that even after four to five years of teacher training a number of students continue to exhibit excessive stress and anxiety towards their teaching practice (Ohnogi, 1996; Piggf & Marso, 1987).

Some reasons why many pre-service student teachers discontinue with their studies can be directly attributed to excessive stress (Justice, 1998; Sanderson, 2003), that hinders learning (Cassady, 2004), and hinders the development of social competency (Hoffman, 2001) as well as in some cases leads to physical problems (Justice, 1998). Common concerns that many excessively stressed pre-service student teachers experienced weeks prior to their teaching practicum included insomnia, panic attacks and poor eating habits (Sanderson, 2003). Furthermore, Rickinson (1998) identified first year entry and final year completion as crisis points amongst vulnerable pre-services student, which adversely affected their capabilities to successfully adjust and/or change to the demands and expectations of undergraduate degree programs.

#### *Added difficulties of NESB students*

As well as the stressors their peers face, NESB student teachers confront additional difficulties and concerns. NESB students reported problems with language, communication and cultural differences which had a negative impact on their successful completion of field experiences in schools; they reported on problems of feeling isolated, financial worries and racism, which also contributed to their withdrawal from study (Watts Pailliotet, 1997). Givens and Bennett (2004) and Watts Pailliotet (1997) found that many NESB students did not seek help because they did not know who to talk to and/or did not want to be seen as 'complainers'. Instead they tried to manage on their own with many giving up their studies before completion. Some NESB students are also reluctant to seek help outside their family and friends (Back & Barker, 2002), and are fearful of the social stigma of failure.

Murray-Harvey, Silins and Saebel (1999) compared Australian and Singaporean students' concerns for coping and found that culture played a significant part in how students managed their field experience. While they found that student teachers studying in Singapore reported similar stressors to their Australian counterparts, the Singaporean students reported a significantly higher level of stress. Murray-Harvey et al. (1999) concluded that the Singaporean examination-oriented educational culture increased student teachers' performance anxiety. Murray-Harvey et al. also suggested that Singaporean culture places a higher value on education and saving face and not failing for these student teachers. Female Singaporean students, in particular, experienced more stress in relation to field experience than did their Australian counterparts. Swetnam (2003) suggested that many Asian females were expected to stay home and raise children rather than work outside the home as teachers. Gender equity is not a universal concept realised in many countries and many NESB students now living in Australia need to learn how it is lived within the Australian cultural context.

Understanding gender equity issues is one factor NESB students must face, but not the only one. It is important that NESB students learn how to cope within all areas of Australian school culture so that they do not begin their teaching careers in Australian schools at a distinct disadvantage. Additionally, many NESB students experience cultural and academic isolation during their university experience (Hood & Parker, 1994). Cheng, Leong, and Geist (1993) found that Asian university students, studying in America, self-reported higher obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity and depression and phobic anxiety on the Brief Symptom Inventory, than American students, indicating their higher levels of psychological distress. While Morton, Vesco, Williams and Awender (1997) found Canadian and British student teachers were not only similar in their concerns about their field experience but also reported similar stress levels.

Watts Pailliotet (1997) reported a case study about the personal experiences of an ethnic and language minority preservice teacher, an Asian woman studying in America. She found that the young woman faced many difficulties in her university studies and her field experience placement that were in addition to those generally experienced in relation to being a student teacher. In her fourth semester "Vivian" failed her field experience, despite her strong student rapport, enthusiasm, academic achievement and a satisfactory report from her supervising teacher. Vivian's difficulties seemed to stem from her being different from the school norm, culturally and linguistically. Upon reflection of her practicum experiences, she explained that her experience of schooling in her home culture was quite different from that experienced in an American school. She explained that she was taught to respect teachers and not speak up, so when asked to justify her actions she froze and went quiet. "The more they talk at me, the more I lose my confidence" (p.675). The study identified some language and communication difficulties for Vivian: "I don't always talk much in class, sometimes I'm embarrassed... but they don't listen to you because you're really quiet and your accent" (p.684). Financial concerns, social isolation, cultural tensions between her home and her university life as well as instances of stereotyping and racism all contributed to Vivian's difficulties in completing her pre-service education program.

Assumptions about teaching are shaped by personal experience and history and are important to all pre-service teachers. However, they seem particularly important for individuals who are part of a minority group (Zitlow & DeCoker, 1994). Anecdotal information gathered from staff at a large education university faculty in Australia from the Student Guild Office and the Field Experience Office, suggested that a significant number of students 'at risk' of dropping out or failing their course of study were NESB pre-service students. One secondary education course in particular was identified in the Course Performance Report from 2004-2005 as having an attrition rate of 56.3%. NESB students described that language barriers contributed to hampering their pathway to successful teaching. In a recent program offered at the university by Campbell and Uusimaki (2006) that focused on reducing student teachers' stress and anxiety about practicum, a quarter of the students who participated in the program were NESB students. The biggest challenge for

NESB students at risk appears to be a mismatch between students' expectations of what teaching is going to be like in Australia and the realities of what they find in day-to-day classrooms.

Therefore, it is important to address the problem of NESB student stress before and during field experience to increase student retention and completion rates. Additionally, extra support could reduce the attrition rate in the first few years of teaching where it occurs most frequently (Manlove & Guzell, 1997). Ensuring that NESB teachers are well-supported and well-adjusted across their early years of teaching will also help to ensure that school students are provided with a better learning environment that promotes and encourages cultural diversity. Support for excessively stressed NESB pre-service student teachers' prior (and during) their practicum is thus an essential component of teacher education programs. One way to assist NESB students is by providing them with some pre-field experience workshops designed specifically for their needs.

### **Programs tried elsewhere**

Cruickshank, Newell, and Cole (2003) tested several approaches to student support including individual mentoring/ tutoring, self-directed learning, support courses and content-based units. They found that no single approach was sufficient to meet all students' needs. In particular, for their study group of NESB students, they found that students from different cultures (Asian or Arabic, for example) may have different approaches to education and so have different needs.

In addition, Givens and Bennett (2004) found that mentoring strategies had to be modified to meet the needs of each particular client group. Originally they set up a program that was only accessed occasionally by NESB students; they found that students did not identify with the service being offered because it did not take into account diverse nationalities, religions and ethnicities as well as not identifying specifically how the service could assist students. After carrying out a needs analysis to determine areas which students described as important, Givens and Bennett reframed their program to suit the students' expressed needs and experienced a greater and more positive response from NESB students accessing the service.

### **Pilot study being undertaken at large Australian Education Faculty to assist NESB students**

A pilot project, the Program for retention of English-as-a-second language student teachers (PREST), was conducted at a large Australian university. The program's aim was to offer a series of five workshops to enhance NESB students' confidence and skills in undertaking their field experience placements. The project was designed to minimise stress levels for NESB students in relation to their practicum so as to address attrition for this equity group by better preparing them for their field experience placements. In particular, the PREST program addressed language, communication and

cultural differences that NESB students identified as specifically stressful for them in relation to their field experience placements.

The PREST program was funded through a \$10,000 grant from the University Equity Committee. Originally, the program was to be run in first semester, 2006, with a repeat program run during second semester. However, the facilitators found during the course of the first program that NESB preservice teachers were eager to continue with the program through to second semester. Schoorman (2000) suggested that the process of change to include the issues of diversity and equity in current programming is gradual rather than instantaneous. This was found with these NESB students, who indicated early on that they needed more than one semester to understand all the issues raised though the PREST program. Indeed, the program facilitators had to add an extra workshop to accommodate the NESB students' perceived needs.

The PREST program was opened to all education students who described themselves as NESB; however, participants consisted mainly of students enrolled in the one-year graduate teaching program, although there were some participants from the undergraduate teaching as well. Having such a large percentage of NESB participants who were enrolled in the post-graduate program was a clear indication that this cohort of students felt somewhat isolated in gaining help for preparing for their field experience. Participation in the program was voluntary so there was no fixed number of students attending any of the sessions. Thirty-five NESB students made an initial contact to participate in the program.

The content of the PREST program was driven by participants. At an initial meeting with the NESB pre-service teachers the facilitators asked participants to share their views on major concerns or issues they had as they prepared for practicum. Issues of most concern for these pre-service teachers included anxiety over their lack of understanding of cultural differences between Australian schools and schools in their home country; student behaviour management issues and language issues.

Participants claimed that they were more familiar with teacher-centred classrooms where the teachers held the power and knowledge, which is generally not found in Australian school. In addition NESB students were uncertain about how to go about negotiating a curriculum with the children they would be teaching, a practice that was unfamiliar to them in their own schooling. This finding is in line with research conducted by Feimen-Nemser (1993) who reported that most beginning teachers are strongly influenced by their own experiences of school as pupils. Indeed, participants claimed that they had no idea what 'negotiating the curriculum' meant in the Australian context and were fearful that they would not be able to meet this requirement.

NESB pre-service teachers identified that they felt embarrassed to have their language corrected by host teachers, especially in front of children and parents. They were aware that some host teachers found them difficult to understand and were conscious that children may find them difficult to



understand as well. NESB pre-service teachers felt supported when host teachers kept an open mind and did not prejudge their capabilities but were supportive of their efforts.

Behaviour management was a prominent area of stress for these preservice teachers. The NESB students professed that in their home cultures, children were expected to be quiet and respectful of teachers whereas in Australian schools, the student-teacher dynamic was very different. These findings concur with the literature (Watts Pailliotet, 1997; Swetnam, 2003) and suggest that more attention needs to be directed at helping this cohort of student teachers understand the culture of Australian schools. Part of the PREST program included case studies that focused on issues of behaviour management in which program participants worked through solutions together. Participants found this process of group sharing/learning helpful in providing them with support for their ideas and also in gaining new insights into possible behaviour management strategies to use in their upcoming practicum.

Student teachers are required to write observations notes while on their field experience as part of their practicum workload (eg. observing child-teacher interactions, behaviour management strategies) as well as writing up comprehensive lesson plans. Some NESB students felt more comfortable if they took notes in their first language and translated these notes into English at home before presenting them to their host teachers for evaluation/feedback. Such a strategy adds an additional step to the process for these student teachers. Observation notes are generally expected by host teachers to be typed up on a computer so they are legible (as compared with handwritten observations) and many NESB students worked well into the early hours of the morning preparing their observations and lesson plans for the next day. This extra workload for NESB student teachers was also observed by Watts Pailliotet (1997) who reported how the student in her study went to school overly tired each day and so worried that she was not able to give her best to the teaching situation. NESB students in the PREST program also worried that they were not able to present their best work to their host teachers.

Another activity that was affected by language skill difficulty was learning how to navigate all the paperwork that students are required to complete in order to become registered teachers in Queensland. This problem had not been anticipated by the facilitators of the program; however, was of great concern for the students. As the graduate program runs for only one year, it now seems obvious that this issue would be of great concern for these students.

On the whole, NESB pre-service teachers found the process of completing paperwork throughout their university studies quite stressful and felt that they had not been given enough instruction, time and direction on how to do this part of their course. The NESB students in our program felt they were at a disadvantage because they did not already know how to access the correct information or to find the forms they needed. Additionally, the university requires students to complete a portfolio for graduation and the NESB

students did not know what they needed to do to complete their portfolios. Indeed, they did not really understand what a portfolio was. Clearly, these are vital components of teacher preparation that need to be addressed for these student teachers to achieve successful outcomes in their course of study.

The findings from the PREST program highlighted the need for a developed intervention designed specifically for NESB education students in the graduate program. NESB students who were in the four-year program had many of the same concerns as the graduate students but to a much less degree. Students in the graduate program have only one year to complete the course work and field experience placements; they have a huge workload with information presented to them continuously throughout the school year. It is not surprising then that they would feel overwhelmed and anxious about going out on their field experience placements and completing the course workload needed by the end of their studies for graduation.

However, a benefit of running a program such as the PREST program was that NESB students made connections with other NESB peers completing their teacher training. NESB students were able to discuss concerns and problems about their practicum placements and generally about being a student at an Australian university. These students reported that this kind of forum helped to reduce their anxiety as they worked through issues together. For example, participants benefited from sharing their concerns as well as ideas on what behaviour management strategies worked in the classroom and how the school day was organised. For example, many of the high school preservice teachers were amazed that high school students moved from class to class for each subject, whereas in their home country it is the teachers who move from class to class. The PREST program gave NESB students an opportunity to meet with other students experiencing a similar situation and to explore similar concerns in a non-threatening environment. Student satisfaction at the end of the program was high with reports that they would recommend such a program to other students.

## **Implications**

One of the important prerequisites of successful teaching is confidence in one's preparedness to teach. Whilst most student teachers experience a range of anxieties prior to, and during practicum, NESB student teachers face additional pressures, as a result of language, communication and cultural differences which are rarely built into teacher preparation programs. It is well documented that beginning teachers experience a 'reality shock' when faced with the actual demands of teaching practice (Churchill & Walkington, 2002). For NESB students, the disparity between their own teaching ideals and beliefs and the reality of Australian classrooms is heightened.

Universities therefore need to do more to prepare NESB student teachers for the challenges they will meet and help them learn what will sustain them in their efforts to grow as professionals. We suggest that support programs should focus on bridging the gap between NESB students' theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge by beginning support programs at least

six months prior to engaging in field experience, and by using methods that enable student teachers to look more closely at their own teaching beliefs and practices in the classroom and how they align to teaching in an Australian context.

Further evaluation of the effectiveness of specific support interventions designed to help NESB student teachers prepare for teaching in the classroom is required. The present program could have been improved by linking to other services at the university that support NESB students such as the International Student Services to help with students' writing processes, having NESB students participate in micro-teaching sessions that identify specific areas such as speed of speech, the specifics of classroom talk, assertiveness and gaining respect from children, parents and colleagues. Videotaping students during their field experience to allow teacher educators to observe areas where students could use their teaching skills more effectively (Hancock, 2003) might be appropriate to further help student teachers identify personal areas of strengths and weaknesses. An initial bridging course for graduate student teachers could also provide more success for NESB students to better prepare them for working and living within the Australian context.

## **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the need for education institutions to recognise the challenges NESB student teachers face during practicum and the important role they play in building student teachers' confidence in teaching. A program such as PREST offers specific aid to NESB students in helping them understand Australian school culture and in gaining the confidence to take a positive part in that culture. The reduction of excessive stress in prospective NESB teachers not only enables them to more fully participate in their own learning and retain them in the profession but would also benefit the pupils in their classes. As Australian universities have made a commitment to increase enrolment of NESB students, it is their responsibility to offer these students the best support possible so that NESB students achieve success. We believe that the PREST program is one program that has assisted in helping NESB students attain such success.

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