Preparing culturally and linguistically diverse preservice Early Childhood teachers for field experience

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Abstract*

This article reports on an action research project focussed on preparing culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) preservice early childhood teachers for field experience. A series of targeted workshops delivered over one semester was designed to support the students to develop intercultural competence in relation to knowledge, attitude, skills and behaviours that contribute to success on field placement. Findings indicate that short-term initiatives targeted specifically to students' identified needs and strengths can help to build intercultural competence for both students and teacher educators. For the participants, access to communication strategies, opportunities for rehearsal of teaching practice, and peer and academic support contributed to shifts in attitude, and the development of skills and new knowledge. New learnings for the teacher educators included challenging assumptions about CALD students' sense of community and belonging in the university context.

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Background

The internationalisation of Australian higher education has been a prominent trend in the past decade. Increasing diversity in student populations requires attention to culturally responsive teaching and learning, and considerations of student experiences of coursework and field placements within degree programs (Harrison & Ip, 2013; Mak & Barker, 2013). For students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, research indicates that field placements in particular can produce unique challenges, including communication and language barriers, unfamiliarity with the Australian context and colloquialisms, interpreting how field supervisors define success, and assessment by way of western standards of graduate proficiency (Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012; Ortlipp & Nuttall, 2011; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). For both university staff and field supervisors, there are additional cognitive and affective demands of intercultural competence necessary for effective approaches to teaching and learning and the supervision of CALD students in the field. Additional demands include knowledge of cultural similarities and differences, sensitivity toward students' specific cultural and language needs, and self-awareness of personal assumptions and biases about CALD students' capabilities (Harrison & Ip; Spooner-Lane et al.).

In university contexts, CALD students can experience social isolation and a mismatch between teaching and learning expectations. While such experiences point to a general lack of intercultural competence demonstrated by some teacher educators (Boughton, Halliday, & Brown, 2010), classroom-based initiatives have proved successful in supporting both teacher educators and students to understand and to develop intercultural competence (see Boughton et al., 2010; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, Mercer, Hepple & Carrington, 2013). The development of intercultural competence is complex and occurs over an extended period of time, although short-term initiatives can support the progression of knowledge, attitude, skills and behaviours—four key dimensions of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Perry & Southwell, 2011). In line with such initiatives, this article reports on a project aimed at building an evidence-base to provide targeted support for CALD early childhood preservice teachers' preparation for field experience over the course of one semester.

Field experience is an integral component of early childhood teacher preparation programs. Within the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree program at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), a large metropolitan university in Brisbane, Australia, field experience is embedded within existing units. This recent change in course design is a shift away from stand-alone field experience units that were conducted traditionally over a 13-week semester, with the practicum scheduled in the final weeks of the semester program. In the new model, field experience content constitutes 30% of the overall unit, with the remaining content focusing on aspects not directly related to field experience and field experience preparation; for example, child development, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. In this model, there is less opportunity for extensive preparation of preservice teachers for field placement. For students from CALD backgrounds, this problem presents additional and unique challenges given the raft of prior research that highlights language, logistical and emotional barriers to practicum success (see Ashman, Short, Muir, Jales, & Myhill, 2013; Campbell, Tangen, & Spooner-Lane, 2006; Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003; Iyer & Reese, 2013; Jeong et al., 2011). Such issues are reflected within field experience reports on students' progress completed by teacher supervisors in the field. Concerns about CALD preservice teachers' preparation for field experience prompted this current project.

The project

Principles of action research guided the project design. Cycles of questioning, gathering data, reflection and deciding on a course of action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003) enabled the authors (teacher educators) to learn from the participants' experiences, engage in self-reflection, revise directions and priorities for the targeted workshops, and introduce changes throughout the project. Stringer (2008) describes this process as action-oriented and characteristic of action research as it is recursive, interwoven and overlapping, rather than procedural.

Participants in the project comprised twelve early childhood preservice teachers who were due to undertake field experience in either a primary school, Kindergarten setting, or childcare setting for children aged birth-3 years. The participants, all female, were in their second or third year of study of a four year (or equivalent) early childhood degree program. Countries of origin for the participants included China, Korea, Africa and Malaysia. Two of the participants had failed at least one field experience prior to participating in the project, although this was not a criterion for participation. The aim of the project was to develop an evidence-base leading to the development of a series of four targeted workshops implemented over the course of Semester 1, 2015. Each of the workshops (see Table 1 for an overview of Workshop 1) were designed and facilitated by the three authors, drawing on a combination of participant input and feedback collected within each action research cycle, and the authors' knowledge of academic and practical content necessary for success on field placement in early childhood settings. In line with Deardorff's (2006) dimensions of intercultural competence, the sessions were also designed to build capacity in the four areas of knowledge, attitude, skills and behaviours in relation to both personal and professional capabilities. For field experience specifically, this included skills, attitudes and behaviours related to communication patterns with parents and supervising teachers, and knowledge of western standards of proficiency related to critical reflection, and the design and management of learning experiences in early childhood settings (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Overview of Workshop 1*

Time	Activity	Resources
10.30-11.00	Activity 1: Communication • Communication strategies for use with supervising teacher and parents	• Practice scenarios • Common Australian colloquialisms
11.00-11.30	Activity 2: Critical Reflection • What is critical reflection? • Going beyond description: How to write a critical reflection of teaching practice	• Student example with lecturer feedback • Practice vignette • Critical reflection journal article
11.30-12.00	Activity 3: Storybook Reading • Modelling of a storybook reading and extension activities • Students to choose a storybook to practice with and to read to children at Workshop 4	• Children's literature • Tiddalik story and resources (balloon, shower cap, child's painting) for extension activity

Within the four workshops (each 1.5 hours in length), learning opportunities were framed by small-group peer learning, collaboration between students and teacher educators, and the support of an academic language and learning educator who was experienced in supporting CALD students' learning. The workshops provided time and resources for pre-preparation, observation and rehearsal. Rehearsal was a targeted skill set given that it is a salient theme in the literature. CALD students' preference on field experience is to observe, rather than to participate (Iyer & Reese, 2013; Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012; Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). That is, they tend towards "peripheral participation" rather than participation (Iyer & Reese, 2013, p. 34). In contrast, a key behaviour valued by supervising teachers in the field is initiative—or a student's willingness to "jump in", interact and "have a go" from the commencement of placement. Iyer and Resse (2013) reported that for these students to participate and become part of community, it is essential that they practise or rehearse.

The culminating event following the workshops was a site visit to a Preparatory classroom. The aim of the visit was for the participants to apply their skills in reading aloud to children in a real-world teaching context using the book with which they had rehearsed during the workshop sessions.

Evaluation of the participants' experiences of field experience and their feedback on the efficacy of the targeted workshops was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the barriers experienced by CALD students undertaking field experience in early childhood settings?

2. What does student feedback indicate about the efficacy of targeted workshops that support CALD students' preparation for field experience in early childhood settings?

Data were drawn from multiple sources. In the initial action research cycle, a needs analysis was conducted with the participants to guide the direction and focus of the workshops. The needs analysis was carried out informally with the students mirroring a conversation model to create a climate of collaboration and trust. To support momentum in further action research cycles, different sources of data were collected at key points in the project. For example, a focus group was arranged mid-way through the semester to allow the participants to provide feedback on the content and delivery of the workshops. Following this, a second needs analysis was conducted via email correspondence where participants could comment on any further topics they wished to be included in the workshops. Finally, an online survey was distributed to the participants near completion of the project to ascertain the efficacy of the workshops. Ethical clearance for the research was granted by the University Ethics committee (Approval number: 1500000082).

The focus group data and the open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically (Patton, 2002), with coding and categorisation leading to the development of four themes: barriers to success; emotions; knowledge; and core skills. In line with an action research methodology, analysis occurred both during and at the completion of the project, as seen in the use of the initial needs analysis to guide the direction and focus of the four workshops and ongoing self-reflection by the authors. The open-ended survey responses enabled the participants to provide responses specific to their experiences related to the field experience and workshops, with the closed questions assigned a numeric value. The four themes were mapped back to the research questions. Key findings focused on pre-service teachers' experiences of field experience and their views on the efficacy of the workshops are presented below. Key learnings for the authors (teacher educators) are also presented.

Findings and discussion

Barriers

Barriers reported by the CALD preservice early childhood teachers in relation to success on field experience aligned with existing research. For example, the initial needs analysis identified language and communication to be of primary concern, particularly in relation to communicating with parents during the field placement. In early childhood contexts, regular and sustained interactions with families are core to the curriculum, with centre-parent partnerships assessed within national quality frameworks (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2015). In comparison with other educational settings including primary and high schools, expectations around parental contact and partnerships in early childhood settings differ. This can place additional stressors on CALD preservice teachers in relation to language, communication, and culture, as reported here.

> As a student teacher like you're not sure whether you should approach them (parents), whether you should be talking or not … because we come from different culture and they're like, we're not sure like how the conversation should be.

> If you have a meeting then you want to complain or you want to tell the parents something that their child did, you don't know how to start that. You don't know how to easily without making them distressed or, you know, making them a little bit upset.

Communication with parents is a common concern for all students undertaking field experience. For CALD students, understanding how to approach parents and how to orient conversations about young children's behaviours and competencies has additional layers in relation to acceptable forms of communication (e.g., using a strengths-based approach to discuss children's behaviours rather than to "complain" or to "tell the parents something that their child did … without making them distressed"). Misunderstanding about the roles and responsibilities of preservice teachers and supervising teachers in relation to what is spoken about with parents can also be of concern.

Preparedness for undertaking field experience

In response to questions about their preparedness for undertaking field experience prior to participation in the workshops, 37.5% of the participants identified emotions such as worry. Along with language and communication, the participants related feeling worried to a lack of confidence in teaching practice, and to differences in cultural experiences and understanding when conversing with teachers on site.

> Because this is my first prac in a birth-2 setting, and when I look at the progression table there are two full-day experience I have to teach. I am not confident enough to teach the whole class.

> I'm confident when I know what to do with the teaching content and I lose confidence when I'm not confident with the content and when children ask you difficult questions when you don't know how to answer.

> With parents I'm not sure what topic to bring up … with teachers during lunch time because of the language difference sometimes I can't understand it (too fast). I don't have similar experiences of their topics.

The third comment in particular points to some of the additional demands and competencies for supervising teachers in the field who require knowledge of cultural similarities and differences and sensitivity toward students' specific cultural and language needs (Harrison & Ip, 2013; Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). The demonstration of these aspects of intercultural competence can be a challenge for teachers in

Australian educational settings given the teacher workforce identifies predominantly as white, Anglo-Celtic and monolingual (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). As a result, the development of intercultural competence is generally limited to personal experience and isolated opportunities for professional development (Miller, Knowles, & Grieshaber, 2011).

Gaining confidence and skills

Focus group data that related to engagement in the workshops revealed that the participants did gain confidence and build skills in areas of identified need, such as communication, academic skills, and communication with children, supervising teachers and families.

> Overcoming issues that associate with English being my second language was discussed and that helped in prac.

> It gave me more knowledge about doing critical reflections and strategies to communicate with students, teachers and families.

> It helps me to understand more about communication skills and how to response when it comes to conflict and awkward situations.

In each of the above comments, there is proactive orientation focussed on strategies and responses that enable preservice teachers to manage potentially challenging situations on field experience. Changes in knowledge, attitude, skills and behaviours (e.g., "more knowledge about doing critical reflections", "overcoming issues", "strategies to communicate…", "how to response") provide evidence of the participants developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) during the workshops, particularly in relation to communication styles and interactional patterns. Given that some CALD students will wait for instruction or retreat from conversations and interactions they may find

challenging (Iyer & Reese, 2013), a suite of strategies and responses to draw on in professional practice is highly valuable, along with a willingness to employ such strategies in different situations.

Efficacy of the targeted workshops

Data from the focus group aligned closely with the participants' views on the efficacy of the workshops reported in the survey data. The survey conducted at the end of the project addressed Research Question 2: *What does student feedback indicate about the efficacy of targeted workshops that support CALD students' preparation for field experience in early childhood settings?* In line with reported issues around cultural and language barriers, the participants found the focus on communication strategies to be very useful and they rated the practical tasks (e.g., communication role-plays, learning songs, and strategies for reading to young children) presented in the workshops highly (all participants rated "very useful"). Academic writing tasks also rated highly (all participants rated "very useful"), including writing and deconstructing critical reflections and documentation. When asked to explain whether participating in the workshops had assisted preparation for field experience, responses included the following.

> English language support: tips on how to better communicate with parents and teacher. Overcoming issues that associate with English being my second language was discussed and that helped in prac. Songs and books presented in the workshops were part of my everyday resources.

> The community, support group, professional guidance, sharing from peers broaden my exposure and they are so encouraging and motivational. Telling myself I am not alone. It prepares/energises my mindset/attitude for this whole teaching journey.

Comments about community and sharing with peers were common in the participants' survey responses and led to new learning for the authors (teacher educators), as discussed later. Here, we present a table (Table 2) outlining the participants' ratings of different elements of the workshops including critical reflection, communication skills, dialogue instruction and learning songs and finger plays. Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of these elements through the survey question: *When thinking of the activities conducted within the workshops please rate how useful you have found them in preparing for your field experience.*

research assistant was employed to conduct the interviews and collect anonymous survey responses.

New learning for teacher educators

Survey data and qualitative comments from the participants indicate the success of this project, but it is important to highlight some of the authors' (teacher educators) assumptions about the participants to show how intercultural competence is of concern for both teacher educators and students in university contexts. For the authors, the self-reflection component of the action research cycles led to a

Table 2: *Efficacy of the targeted workshops*			
Critical reflection	Communication skills	Dialogue instruction	Learning songs and finger plays
100% useful	100% useful	100% useful	100% useful

While the above results indicate high level satisfaction with the workshops, of most importance were the opportunities the workshops provided to help the participants to better understand what supervising teachers were 'looking for' when assessing their performance on field experience. As the participants gained knowledge and skills, adapted behaviours, and changed their attitude toward field experience, deeper and more open discussion about expectations and what standards of graduate proficiency 'looked like' on field placement became possible. In this sense, it became possible for the CALD preservice teachers and the teacher educators to develop a shared language about field experience. In relation to the high level satisfaction with the workshops, the authors acknowledge that international students can sometimes be reluctant to critique or give negative comments directly to the teachers involved. To counter the potential for this outcome and to encourage honest responses, a

key learning about the importance of building a sense of community and belonging amongst CALD preservice teachers. We had observed what we assumed to be cohesiveness amongst this group in previous units and semesters. These students often congregated in lectures and tutorials and appeared to be a well-established peer group. However, as a result of the project, we learned that a sense of belonging amongst the group is not automatic, and that time and space are needed for learning about each other's differences, learning styles, strengths and needs. For example, some of the preservice teachers did not know each other's names, despite sitting together in classes and at the refectory during breaks. Some of the participants were also not aware of the cultural backgrounds of their peers. For academic staff, a component of cultural responsiveness is recognising differences within and across cultural groups and avoiding stereotyping or homogenising students from CALD backgrounds (Iyer & Reese, 2013). Coming to know the students individually was central to

our developing intercultural competence as teacher educators, and our better understanding of how social isolation can be hidden and misunderstood in student groups.

The outcomes of this project continue to inform our approaches to teaching and learning in higher education for the purpose of *addressing* rather than simply anticipating the language, cultural and knowledge challenges that CALD students may face in preparing for and undertaking field experience in early childhood contexts. For the project team, an area of need identified through data analysis and collaborative and individual reflection, is a focus on the preparedness of field placement sites to host CALD preservice early childhood teachers. In particular, this project raises questions about responsibility because supervising teachers' capacity to develop intercultural competence and to become self-aware about assumptions and biases they may associate with CALD students is typically attributed to the field placement site alone. This is despite high stakes considerations for universities, including student outcomes, course progression trajectories and attrition rates. The provision of professional development for industry supervisors is a key recommendation for intercultural capacity-building outlined in the *Internationalisation at Home* report prepared for the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (Mak & Barker, 2013). However, research on the distribution of responsibility between university-industry partners to aid intercultural competence is yet to be undertaken and is a potential area of research.

To this point, investigations of intercultural competence and the experiences of CALD students in higher education generally focus on classroom-based practice or innovations. There is scope to extend the terrain of intercultural competence from the university to the field; specifically, early childhood field placement sites. Given that internationalisation is now a prominent trend in higher education and increasing numbers of CALD students undertake field placements, the lack of attention on interactions between students, teacher educators and the field in building intercultural competence is of concern. In particular, there is very limited research on the role of teacher educators in aiding the preparedness of field placement sites to host CALD students and evaluate students' performance. Future research could place emphasis on all three stakeholder groups: CALD early childhood preservice teachers; teacher educators; and field placement sites. We suggest there may be great value in developing shared understanding about meanings of intercultural competence for early childhood preservice teachers, teacher educators and early childhood field placement sites, in the context of field placement and graduate proficiency.

Along with responsibility for aiding the preparedness of field placement sites to host CALD preservice early childhood teachers, the project team have reflected on the need for observational measures of intercultural competence that attend specifically to early childhood contexts. For example, a model developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) comprises four elements: self-concept; open-mindedness; non-judgmental attitudes; and social relaxation. Indicators for this model including respect, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness are well suited to the context of field placement. For early childhood contexts specifically, observational measures of intercultural competence with low-level abstraction and indicators including "cooperation", can support analysis of how preservice teachers are communicating and sharing information with families, and how they are being supported by supervising teachers to do so. We suggest that the development of an intercultural competence observational protocol that is specific to the early childhood sector will benefit teacher educators, supervising teachers and preservice teachers alike.

Conclusion

The findings of this project align with existing research outcomes focussed on the particular challenges CALD students can face when undertaking field experience. Of particular interest were specific challenges for the early childhood field placement, including the requirement for regular and sustained interactions with parents, given they are core to the curriculum and assessed within national quality frameworks. For CALD preservice early childhood teachers who report concerns about language, culture and communication, this aspect of the early childhood practicum can be particularly challenging. This project highlighted how short-term initiatives can support the development of intercultural competence for students and teacher educators in university contexts. Targeted workshops designed to support students to develop intercultural competence in relation to knowledge, attitude, skills and behaviours can contribute to success on field placement and prompt new learnings for teacher educators about ways to demonstrate intercultural competence in approaches to teaching and learning in higher education.

Acknowledgements

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