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Impact of Teachers on an Australian Community Over Ten Years: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to use intensive interviews to evaluate the impact of American teachers on a rural community in New South Wales, Australia from 2005 to 2015. The study analyzed interviews with 10 participants of the Australian community. Survey participants were chosen based on their longevity in the community and their community involvement. Two researchers and a peer reviewer transcribed, coded, and categorized the data into themes suggested by the interview participants using participatory action research. Results from this study identified two major themes: impact on student growth and sense of community, and eight subthemes: student performance, international growth, culture, perceptions and stereotypes, values, pre and post impressions of American teachers, involvement within the community, and community acceptance.

Keywords: Community impact, cultural perceptions, stereotype

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Globalization refers to a full range of factors that are sweeping across the globe unhindered by boundaries and policies of a nation-state (Dator, Pratt, & Seo, 2006; Etling, 2001). With increased globalization, society places greater attention to increasing understanding of stereotypes, cultural awareness, and language barriers (Bunch, Stephens, & Hart, 2011; Etling, 2001). Globalization and culture represent key elements of change in the modern world (Etling, 2001; Greig, 2002). Berry (2008) stated, "...globalization is initiated by intercultural contact and leads to cultural and individual change" (p. 328).

An individual's culture plays a significant role in his/her self-perception. Accordingly, people classify themselves and others into various social categories, and prototypical characteristics theorized from the groups' members to define these categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to Hogg and Reid (2006), "social categorization *depersonalizes* our perception of people – they are not viewed as unique individuals but as embodiments of the attributes of their group" (p. 10). Therefore, impressions of individuals can lead to perceptions of the group as a whole (Tajfel, 1982).

Stereotypes—or prejudices—refer to prejudgments reached before relevant information has been collected (Tajfel, 1981). Although individuals form stereotypes, their implications emerge from the context of group membership (Bar-Tal, 1997). For example, Bunch, Stephens, and Hart's (2011) study on the impact of American teachers on an Australian community found that cultural awareness brought about by the presence of the American teachers disputed some of the stereotypes that Australians had towards Americans. Collectively, socializing members, including parents, grandparents,

and other extended family, not only pass stereotypes to younger generations but create a climate that serves as a facilitator of stereotypical contents in communities (Bar-Tal, 1997).

Communities are fundamental contexts for human activity (Wiesenfeld, 1998). Wiesenfeld (1998) defined community as a "homogenous group of individuals, clearly distinguishable from others" (p. 337). Two major categories of community include the territorial notion and the relational notion (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The territorial aspect of community refers to geography in terms of neighborhood, town or city, while the relational notion of community refers to the quality of human relationship without reference to location (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In addition, there are four criteria that define a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Community membership is a feeling of investment of oneself to become a member and achieve a sense of belonging and a feeling of being a needed part (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In order to determine who is a community member, the attributes sense of belonging and personal investment are used (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of belonging includes "the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group" (p. 10). In addition, personal investment plays a large role in developing emotional connections with community members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This investment, along with a sense of belonging, emotional safety and security, and set boundaries contribute to

who is a part of the community and who is not (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The concept of influence is bidirectional, with the first direction involving a member being attracted to the group and having influence over what the group does which can generate conflict (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This conflict can lead to either competition or cooperation. In competitive situations, an individual does not reach a goal unless all other individuals are unable to reach their goals, whereas in cooperative situations an individual does not reach a goal unless all other individuals participate in reaching the equivalent goal (Grossack, 1964). Furthermore, cooperation leads to more cohesive behavior, attempts of influence, uniformity, and communication versus competition (Grossack, 1964).

Fulfillment of basic needs promotes positive, caring, and helpful human relations (Staub, 2003). In addition to the basic human needs, benevolence and conformity are universal requirements of human existence from a social standpoint (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz & Knafo, 2002). Sharing the same values of needs, priorities, and goals with others fosters the belief that joining together can better satisfy these needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The sharing of needs also leads to group cohesiveness because groups with a sense of community benefit individuals by fulfilling both group and individual needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Overall, a community is considered 'strong' when it is able to "fit people together so that people meet others' needs while they meet their own" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 13).

Shared emotional connections affect a sense of community because it offers members positive ways to interact, events to share, positive resolution to events, opportunities to honor members, personal investment within the community, and a

strong spiritual bond (Chavis et al., 1986). In terms of emotional connection, different aspects affect interaction. McMillan and Chavis (1986) stated that "the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close" (p. 13). However, general interaction does not guarantee cohesiveness, but if the experience is more positive, the bond is greater (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Communities are unique and being a member of a community requires one to adapt and adjust to several influences within that community such as values, beliefs, and goals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Those factors can only be truly understood by being immersed in that particular community and studying the individuals which comprise the community. The researchers were able to locate various studies on the impact and perspectives of individuals who participated in international programs (Black, Moore, Wingenbach, & Rutherford, 2013; Farrell & Suvedi, 2002; Harder & Bruening, 2008; Lawver & Soto-Cruz, 2007; McGowan, 2007; Sharp & Roberts, 2013; Shoulders, Barrick, & Myers, 2011, Zhai & Scheer, 2002), but no studies were found that focused on the impact that an international experience could have on community members.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of American teachers on the local Australian community over a 10 year duration. The specific research question asked was, "How have American teachers impacted the Australian community over 10 years?"

Methodology and Procedure

Participatory action research is focused on facilitating change in the participants as well as the researcher during the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012). Kidd and Kral (2005) stated that

“participatory action approaches are likely the best way to generate knowledge and action that is meaningful for the people involved and make it more likely that researchers may be invited to contribute to those communities” (p. 191-192). One of the basic principles of participatory action research is to reflect on the information gathered as a validity check (Hays & Singh, 2012). Participant observation, interviews, field notes, logs, and document analysis are the forms of research collection in participatory action research used in this study.

Two researchers spent 12 weeks in an Australian community in New South Wales, Australia during fall 2014 and participated in community events and cultural activities such as weekly dinners, social gatherings at local venues, festivities at community members’ homes, and local sports functions. Furthermore, the researchers spent an extensive amount of time within the Australian school system with administrators, teachers, and students.

In addition to participating in community activities, the researchers kept an in-depth reflection log, analyzed community and school documents to better interpret the community climate, kept a field log of overall observations of daily community member interactions, and conducted formal and informal interviews with community members. Prior to interviewing, each participant signed an informed consent statement. The central research question was asked to each participant and based on comments from each participant, follow-up questions proceeded. After each interview, the researchers recorded notes about the interviewee responses, impressions of the interviewee, and reactions of the interviewer to the interviewee.

Conversations were conducted informally and formally over the duration of

12 weeks with several members of the Australian community, and individuals ($n=10$) selected to participate in this study was based on their community involvement. In addition, some of these community members were interviewed in the Bunch, Stephens, and Hart (2011) study and others were chosen until data saturation was accomplished. The community members selected were from the local school system, business affiliates of the community, and impactful participants in the community. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his or her confidentiality. The principal and deputy principal, Caleb and Ryan, respectively, were selected as representatives of the participating school. The selection of participants who represented the community were two agriculture teachers (Scarlett & Oliver), three support members of the school and community (Joseph, Claire, & Lillian), and one individual politically affiliated with the school and community (William). Finally, two area businessmen (John & Miles) were selected because of the strong business connection within the community. The interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed by both researchers and peer reviewer. The researchers and peer reviewer then categorized data into themes before comparing notes and agreeing on themes and subthemes within the data.

Trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, and coherence (Hays & Singh, 2012). Credibility was prominent through the researchers maintaining a journal that included thoughts about the impacts of the research on the research process, participation within the community on the researcher, and the researcher’s presence on the community. A peer reviewer (a university faculty member trained in qualitative research) looked for consistency

between participant responses, researcher observations, notes, and conclusions, which represented dependability. The use of interviews, related literature, reflexive journal, prolonged engagement (12 weeks), and thick description was utilized to maintain transferability. Confirmability was established by participants conducting a member check of the transcribed interviews and data analysis.

Researcher Bias

Since the researchers in this study were members of the Australian community and school system, the researchers acknowledged that personal biases existed. Before traveling to Australia, the researchers' preconceived thoughts about Australians were stereotypical. In the United States, Australians are believed to act similar to *Crocodile Dundee*, only drink Foster's beer, and always cook on the *barbie*. Additionally, it was believed that Australians would speak the same English as Americans but with an accent. Preconceived notions about Australia involved the thought that kangaroos would be in all environments, all animals and insects were deadly and would continuously be surrounding us, and the entire continent of Australia is mainly red desert. However, the Australians were extremely genuine people who held careers and life-long plans just as Americans. Australians also do not just drink Foster's beer contrary to popular belief in the United States. Moreover, they use more than the *barbie* for cooking. While Australians speak English, they have a vast amount of slang, strong, thick accents, and speak very quickly although the researchers were able to properly understand the Australian language in one week. Furthermore, kangaroos were not seen until the researchers left Sydney, and they were not running everywhere. More emus and mountain goats were seen freely wandering

around rather than kangaroos. Additionally, the researchers only had one encounter with a deadly spider throughout the entire 12 weeks in Australia. Lastly, Australia is not one big, red desert despite how the movie *Kangaroo Jack* portrays the land. The community where the researchers spent their time was in *the outback*, which included desert-like conditions, but it was not solid red like the researchers imagined.

Given that the researchers were members within the community for the duration of 12 weeks, the researchers desired the impact on the community be positive. The researchers spent extended time with several community members and knew them on a personal level. Therefore, when analyzing the data, the researchers' had a faculty member, who is extensively knowledgeable in qualitative research, examine the data as well. In order to bracket the researcher bias, the researcher's own beliefs were put into abeyance for the analysis of the data. Furthermore, to ensure validity a feedback loop was used whereby the interview transcriptions were returned to the participants to ensure that the researcher had not misinterpreted the data.

Findings

Based upon the responses from the interviewed participants, the researchers' field notes, and activity logs, the researchers discovered two emergent themes, which were the impact on student growth and sense of community. Within those two emergent themes, eight subthemes also surfaced. The subthemes of student growth included student performance and international growth, and the subthemes of sense of community included culture, perceptions and stereotypes, values, beginning impressions of American teachers verses current impressions, involvement within the community, and community acceptance.

Student Growth

Student performance

Student growth was revealed from participants as it was related to student performance. Most participants noticed an increase in student performance resulting from the presence of American teachers. Scarlett stated, "I think they (Australian students) actually got their work done a lot faster than what they were previously, and I think they seemed to enjoy the class a lot more having someone different in the room." Not only did the presence of American teachers have an impact on students who were enrolled in agriculture classes but also students from other classes as well. Scarlett specified, "I think the kids are a lot more interested to come to class because they knew you were going to be there. Even kids wanted to come to our class out of other classes towards the end." Furthermore, many students who were associated with past behavior problems became more intrigued with the subject matter and class participation.

Those kids, to me, looked a little more interested in the subjects whilst there tends to be lots of behavior problems from the agricultural side of things, and they are not always engaged but just listening to them. They have certainly picked up something from you being here, and I am assuming that it also opened their eyes a little bit to what goes on. (Ryan)

Joseph, Scarlett, Oliver, Caleb, and Ryan agreed the increase in student performance resulted from having an educator present who was culturally different. Joseph stated, "I think they learn different aspects and different things you bring from another country and learn that our way may not be the best way." In addition, Joseph explained,

"Different culture, respect for different things; I think they can learn a lot from different people in different countries." Similarly, Oliver stated, "Students can see different ways of doing things" and that it "definitely has an impact on those who are typically not able to follow one particular aspect but can follow the other one so that way the student gets a change to grasp the concept and application." Additionally, participants suggested that having someone from a different country teach provided students the opportunity to think more globally. Oliver highlighted, "In a remote community like this, having people from outside definitely helps students broaden their views and acceptance."

International growth

According to Joseph, William, Scarlett, Oliver, and Ryan, students also developed an international interest. When asked if hosting American teachers promoted interest of students to travel, Joseph replied, "I think it does. Lots of people ask you lots of questions about what you do [in America], what is [in America]" and that, "students are interested in America and want to go over there and see what another country is like."

From the students that I have spoken to, they have been very curious. They have been asking questions particularly 'where are they from?' 'what is different there from here?' from outside of school, and I talk to some of them at cricket training and things like that, they are often referring to 'such and such they told me this today' and that does not happen all the time and in other classes so there has definitely been interest from the kids, which I think is fantastic. (Ryan)

Furthermore, Ryan added, "It is great, and I think for the kids, it is a great experience for

them as well particularly in an isolated area like [New South Wales City], where most of them would probably not experience going to America.”

Sense of Community

In addition to the impact on student growth, sense of community was another prominent theme that emerged from the participants’ responses. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined sense of community as “a feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9).

Culture

When asked if there had been any changes in culture within the school since the beginning of the program, William responded, “Changes to the culture are better. Sometimes small country towns can be very literal and some kids never experience anything outside their country town... to have someone come in and then establish that professional teacher/student relationship with them is great.” Furthermore, Claire responded, “I think there has been. I had a view of what American culture was like... a lot of that was based on television and movies... which is fantasies in some cases. For me, having that knowledge and having somebody that comes in and talks about ‘well this is my daily life experience’ it is different.”

Nevertheless, not all participants felt the same way. When asked the same question, John replied, “I really do not think there is a cultural shift” because “I do not think a couple teachers here or there are going to change the culture of the town.” However, John stated, “I think they [community members] have enjoyed the cultural differences and enjoyed being exposed to that.”

Perceptions and stereotypes

Although some participants disagreed there had been a culture shift, participants agreed perceptions and stereotypes have changed since the beginning of the program.

It has changed a lot actually. You do see those television programs and things like that. We learn a lot more about different areas of America and a lot more about America from having people out here, which is good. We see [American shows and movies] and that is what we go off of. Some people believe that is how Americans are and the way they act and behave and a lot of that is [not true]. (Miles)

Furthermore, Claire stated, “I now understand there are similarities in what is portrayed in American movies and the Internet, but there are differences too.”

Values

This dissolving of stereotypes also led participants to realize that values were similar to the American teachers. When asked if the participant felt that American teachers shared similar values, William responded, “I think they align quite strongly.” Miles also replied, “Definitely, I think your [American] values are right along with what we are like. I think you guys are strongly Christian from where you are from, and this is more multicultural but still I think the beliefs are the same.”

Beginning Impressions of American Teachers

Some participants admitted that their beginning impressions were not as positive. When asked how they felt when they first learned that there would be an American teacher, Claire stated, “Obviously, your first impression is always ‘what is the impact

going to be with these people being in the school?’ because it is a different school system between the two countries.” Claire mentioned, “We did not know who the teachers were. . . what they [teachers] were going to be like. . . how they were going to affect our kids, so it was important we went in with an open mind.” However, not all participants shared the anxiety of having a new face within the community.

I was really excited because we are constantly learning so all of us could get some opportunity to learn new things and techniques. I first heard that two of the American teachers were coming, I was really interested in seeing what I learned from books and journals and how that has changed or reshaped my practice.
(Oliver)

Some participants were neither anxious nor excited but instead, curious. Ryan stated, “Initially, I asked myself ‘Why pick, Australia?’ I was curious to see how the two different educational systems would work together.” Regardless of initial reactions, all participants agreed they were excited to receive more American teachers.

I think because our last experience was reasonably positive, you are more willing now to step back and go ‘well this is going to be great.’ You are looking forward to it because you are seeing it as a continuation of something good. If it had not been good before, then there would be major problem. (Claire)

Furthermore, Joseph specified, “We look forward to it every time someone new comes out.”

Community involvement

One point to ensuring that impressions are positive is the attitude and involvement of the new members within the community.

If you [American teachers] come in with an open mind to start with and are willing to try things, it makes it easier for community members to support and be involved with you [American teachers]. However, if you [American teachers] came with an attitude of ‘I am not going to do anything’ then community members automatically put up their shutters and think ‘well we are not going to invite you anywhere.’ (Claire)

Additionally, Lillian stated, “I think because you [American teachers] came prepared to try things and experience Australian culture, it has been so much easier to engage with you [American teachers] as well. I am prepared to go the extra mile when I see the teachers from America are prepared to take the extra time to blend in and mix with us...that makes a big difference.”

Community acceptance

The participants in the study claimed the American teachers were well accepted into the community. Scarlett stated, “[NSW City] is an accepting town. The community members also welcome different cultures.”

My recollection is that [the community] has been very accepting of the American teachers. Whether that has gone up, I do not know because I think that it has always been at a high level. We have had some trouble with international teachers in the past because of strong dialects, and some of the kids have really struggled to understand some of the accents that some staff members have and that has caused problems. Also, teachers who have come from a strong misogynistic environment do not understand how our kids do not have those same kinds of values. But, I believe you [American teachers] have settled in

well, and there have not been any cultural issue complaints related to you [American teachers]. (William)

When asked if the community was more accepting of the American teachers since the beginning of the program, Claire replied, "Probably, I think the community is more accepting. I think this is a great program and it enhances the community as well as us enriching the American teachers' perspective on Australia."

Participants in this study agreed the overall impact of the American teachers was overwhelmingly positive. William stated, "It has always been positive to the community. There have been past teachers who have kept in contact with the mentor teachers, older students, and community members." Furthermore, participants revealed the community impact was largely influenced by the American teachers who chose to partake in the experience. Caleb stated, "The previous American teachers fit nicely within in the community and enjoyed the social as well as the academic nature of the role." Moreover, Claire indicated, "The people chosen have been the right people who have desired an international experience."

Conclusions and Future Recommendations

Globalization has been and will continue to be an important aspect to society (Berry, 2008). Furthermore, developing communities with 'strong' community memberships provides a sense of belonging and personal investment for individuals. One aspect of a strong community is being an invested member of an educational system. Participants in this study identified student growth in cultural knowledge as an impactful benefit of having American teachers as members of the isolated community. Therefore, one may conclude that to develop stronger educational systems within the community, different cultural

perspectives need to be infused within that community [educational] system.

Several subthemes emerged from the sense of community including culture, perceptions and stereotypes, values, beginning impressions of American teachers versus current impressions, involvement within the community, and community acceptance. Culture, perceptions, stereotypes, and values are important aspects to a community. Although not all participants felt as if there was a shift in culture, the presence of the American teachers did lead to cultural changes within the Australian community. Each community has distinct cultural characteristics and values, which can perceive immediate impressions of character. This study revealed that the presence of American teachers led to changes in the community members' perceptions and stereotypes of Americans. While individuals do form stereotypes, their impressions of the culture emerge from the context of the group (Bar-Tal, 1997). Therefore, this is an important factor because impressions of individuals can lead to perceptions of the group as a whole (Tajfel, 1982). One may conclude that original impressions of a culture are formed by individuals; however, once individuals from the culture are included in the group, impressions (positive or negative) of the culture will change.

Community acceptance of American teachers was also present in this study. Community acceptance creates a sense of attachment and provides a sense of belonging for individuals within the community (McMillan, 1996). Community members in this study included the American teachers in local events, social functions, and educational opportunities. One may conclude that the American teachers were accepted and had a sense of attachment in the NSW community.

While it is clear that the American teachers had a measureable impact, further study is needed to determine if the impact could be increased by a longer teaching period as well as if a similar impact could be expected if the teachers were in a less welcoming community. Last, a follow up study is needed to determine if the impact on the community is temporal and/or if the impact remains over time.

Some questions arose during this study. Future research questions should answer the following:

1. What impact did American teachers have on the Australian students?
2. What would the impact have been on the Australian community if the American teachers were present for a full year?
3. What impact would American teachers have on a community that was less accepting of international visitors?

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