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Fostering intercultural understanding through secondary school experiences of cultural immersion

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Fostering intercultural understanding through secondary school experiences of cultural immersion

In parallel with many nations' education policies, national education policies in Australia seek to foster students' intercultural understanding (ACARA, 2013; Barrett et al., 2013). Due to Australia's location in the Asia-Pacific region, the Australian government has focused on students becoming "Asia literate" to support Australia's economic and cultural engagement with Asian countries. Drawing on Allport's (1954) optimal contact principles and key factors supporting intercultural understanding, this study examines two "sister school" cultural immersion trips in Indonesia and East Timor to explore ways in which their different approaches supported positive intergroup contact and helped foster intercultural understanding among students. Focus groups and interviews with school project teams and analysis of both researcher and teacher project field notes and documents suggested that these schools' programs could be mapped onto Allport's contact principles in different ways. The paper concludes with promising approaches that can help to inform sister school programs.

Keywords: intercultural understanding; intergroup contact; cultural immersion; sister school; school; student

Introduction

In recent years, schools globally have recognised the need for students to become global citizens (LT Scotland, 2011) and to develop intercultural competence (de Leo, 2010; Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoin-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2013). This paper describes responses of two Australian schools to federal and state government efforts to prepare students for a role in the Asia-Pacific region; each school undertook intercultural immersion activities through visiting a "sister school" overseas. We will describe the context for, and teacher reflection on, the initiatives, and analyse the efforts through the lens of intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) and related research findings (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). As recommended by others (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), our aim is to encourage the use of this theoretical framework in planning and evaluating immersion activities in order to acquire a more

comprehensive understanding of how intergroup contact can work in school-based cultural immersion settings.

Increasingly, Australian federal and state governments have recognised the need to prepare students for living and working in an interconnected world (Scarino, 2009). As part of this recognition, policies and curriculum documents have, to varying degrees, focused on developing the skills students need to support a socially inclusive multicultural society. While students are expected to have the values and capabilities to act as local and global citizens broadly, the Australian government has clearly prioritised engagement with Asia. This was exemplified by the National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools (Curriculum Corporation, 2006) and later reiterated in other curriculum documents including the Global Perspectives Framework (Curriculum Corporation, 2008) and the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which outlined the need to develop “active and informed citizens [who] are able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia” (MCEETYA, 2008).

These curriculum initiatives coincide with the Australian government’s recognition of Australia’s position within an Asia-Pacific region undergoing rapid economic growth and urbanisation. This was recognised as a national imperative in a White Paper on Australia’s engagement with Asia, dubbing the 21st century, the “Asian century” (Australian Government, 2012). Education is identified as a key focus area for increasing engagement by preparing students to develop skills and knowledge to be “Asia literate” starting from their Foundation year around age five. This literacy includes having language capabilities, cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding to strategically and appropriately engage with Asian countries, especially China, India, Indonesia, Japan and the Republic of Korea (Australian Government, 2012).

In this political context, schools are increasingly being called on to support students to become “Asia literate” including having capabilities and knowledge to respectfully interact with people from diverse backgrounds and skills to take advantage of global opportunities in strategic regions such as Asia. To support these aims, the new Australian Curriculum recently included “intercultural understanding” (ICU) as a core capability for all students to acquire by Year 10 across diverse subject areas including mathematics, science and humanities (ACARA, 2013). However, there is little research-based evidence of what best supports schools in this effort. There is also very little evidence about effective approaches to developing ICU for students in primary and secondary school settings (Walton, Priest, & Paradies, 2013).

Partly in response to this gap in the evidence base, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) facilitated a nine-month intercultural understanding field trial (ICUFT) involving 26 Victorian primary and secondary schools to inform policy and practice about effective approaches for developing ICU. The field trial’s primary aim was to explore school-based teaching and learning strategies for promoting ICU for students in Years 3-12. Each school was responsible for conducting their own project for the field trial. Thus schools had six months to design and implement their individual project. The nine-month timeframe in which schools were required to understand the project aims, form a change team, and then develop and implement their project was a significant determining factor for project type, feasibility and quality in terms of project content and depth.

This paper focuses on two secondary schools whose field trial projects built on existing international “sister school” programs in the Asia-Pacific region with the aim to develop their students’ ICU. “Sister schools” or partner schools are part of international education and involve ongoing links between two schools, normally between schools in

different countries, in order to promote global citizenship and ICU (DEECD International Education Division, 2013). The two schools used their sister school connection to take a group of secondary students on a short cultural immersion trip to Indonesia and East Timor, respectively. The aim of this paper is to describe how each school approached this activity, and to examine their approaches in light of the guiding principles (Allport, 1954) and evidence-based predictors of positive outcomes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005) of intergroup contact theory. Key aims are to contribute to greater understanding of the “processes of intergroup contact” which have been found to successfully predict intercultural understanding and prejudice reduction (Pettigrew 2006, p. 189) and to encourage researchers and practitioners to consider sister school initiatives from the perspective of Allport’s theory and related research findings. The paper concludes with key factors which support the theoretical evidence and can be used to inform other sister school programs, namely adequate preparation, potential for increased familiarity and time for reflection.

Theoretical background

Intergroup contact and intercultural understanding

Allport’s (1954) seminal work on intergroup contact theory, namely the four contact principles, has significantly influenced the development and evaluation of programs and activities designed to reduce prejudice and promote positive intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These contact principles include (1) participants having equal status while (2) engaging in cooperative activities that (3) work not only toward a common goal but also toward recognising a common humanity (Allport, 1954, p. 281). Additionally, the interaction is normally intimate rather than superficial and occurs in (4) an authorising social environment (i.e., the school and teachers establishing norms for positive interaction) that supports prejudice reduction.

While, Allport examined “whether” intergroup contact reduces prejudice, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of intergroup contact research to understand “when and how contact reduces bias” (Kenworthy, Turner, & Hewstone, 2005, p. 289). Using global indicators of Allport’s optimal contact conditions, which include intergroup friendship and the extent to which structured programs are guided by those conditions, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that programs that deliberately structured their activities in accordance with Allport’s optimal conditions resulted in more prejudice reduction and positive attitudes towards groups with different racial or ethnic characteristics. However, (1) the presence of *all* contact conditions simultaneously was not essential and (2) intergroup ‘friendship’ was not necessary. Instead, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) argued that increasing familiarity and liking, and reducing negative factors such as intergroup anxiety may be the important elements in determining positive attitudinal changes. For instance, a recent study found that negative contact has a more significant impact on increased prejudicial attitudes than positive contact has on reducing them (Barlow et al., 2012). If, as Allport (1954) stated, intimacy (i.e., high quality contact) and cooperative interactions are primary, then factors that might prevent an intimate and cooperative environment need to be explored (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In terms of the type of interaction, Kenworthy and colleagues (2005) conclude that a combination of interpersonal (i.e., contact focused on individual attributes) and intergroup (i.e., contact during which group membership is salient) interactions fosters an optimal intergroup contact environment. This includes helping people to relate to each other on a personal level (e.g., through self-disclosure) in order to increase familiarity and challenge group stereotypes while also maintaining group identities so that individual differences contribute to awareness of intragroup diversity rather than being seen as exceptional (Kenworthy et al., 2005).

Related to optimal conditions for intergroup contact are factors that promote intercultural understanding. Intercultural understanding can be broadly defined as “an on-going critically reflexive process involving the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge, necessary for interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds” (Walton et al. 2013, p. 1). A recent review of school-based ICU interventions identified four key factors that contribute to fostering ICU (Walton et al., 2013). The main ICU factors include (1) engaging students from both majority and minority backgrounds, (2) critical reflection on prejudices and assumptions rather than only building cultural knowledge, (3) cultural reflexivity including empathy and perspective-taking and (4) positive interpersonal and intergroup contact experiences.

A common approach in schools, especially given issues of a “crowded curriculum” and competing pressures, is to take a celebratory approach to culture, which often only goes as far as learning about food, holidays, and a few cultural practices (Sleeter & Grant, 2009; Toner, 2010; Walton et al., 2013). At a cognitive level, students need to be supported to be aware of people with different social and cultural backgrounds and to learn about different cultures. However, a materialistic approach to intercultural understanding is insufficient and a potential outcome of taking such an approach is that it can reinforce stereotypes where people with different cultural practices and beliefs are exoticised and represented as static “cultural others” (Dressel, 2005; Lintner, 2005; Turner & Brown, 2008). While information is important for knowledge acquisition and exposure to counter-stereotypes, as Allport (1954) concluded, “the teaching of correct information does not automatically change prejudice; but it may in the long run help” (p. 486).

Importantly, studies have found building skills such as perspective-taking and empathy helps to foster ICU and also seems to play a critical role in prejudice reduction (Schechter & Salomon, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) by creating what Kenworthy and

colleagues refer to as a “self-target overlap” (2005, p. 287). This is similar to the concept of a “dual identity framework, which incorporates the simultaneous activation of the original subgroup identity and a common or superordinate identity” (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012, p. 599) or as both different and similar to people perceived to have different group identities. Importantly, learning about other cultures or about the experiences of people with diverse social and cultural backgrounds should also happen in conjunction with a deeper understanding of one’s own cultural practices and beliefs. The existing literature demonstrates that engaging in culturally reflexive processes through skills such as perspective-taking and empathy are crucial for students to have the capacity and ability to understand people from different cultural backgrounds (Molina, Brigman, & Rhone, 2003; Louie, 2005; Tettegah & Neville, 2007). As Allport (1954) pointed out, “The fundamental premise of intercultural education says in effect, no person knows his own culture who knows only his own culture” (p. 486).

Based on these findings from the intercultural education and intergroup contact literature, this paper examines two distinct approaches to supporting intergroup contact during overseas cultural immersion trips among Australian secondary school students. We aim to describe and explore the intersection between intercultural understanding and intergroup contact theory by evaluating program content as well as the processes and approaches used to develop the students’ ICU. Our analysis compares the overall strategies used by each school in “real-world settings” to understand the extent to which they drew on key ICU factors and Allport’s optimal conditions to “enhance the tendency for positive contact outcomes to emerge” (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 766).

Cultural immersion approaches

Cultural immersion can be broadly described as a method in which participants engage in

activities with people in a cultural environment different to their own with the aim to “promote cross-cultural sensitivity, enhance self-awareness in relation to cultural contexts, focus on commonalities among cultures, and promote the awareness of the subjective level of culture” (Peled & Dunnivan, 2009, p. 20). The majority of research on immersion education has focused on language immersion such as foreign language learning and bilingual schools or two-way immersion programs (Bears & de Jong, 2008; Palmer, 2008; Tedick, Christian, & Williams, 2011). Other studies have considered other immersion approaches such as short-term place-based programs in inner city, rural and/or indigenous communities or education settings (e.g., Boylan & Munsch, 2007; Nuby, 2010; Harrington & Brasche, 2011) and university student programs such as study abroad (e.g., Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009; Plante, Lackey, & Hwang, 2009). Most studies to date have involved university-aged students or teachers rather than school-aged students. Of the studies that involve school-aged students, most involve short-term cultural immersion experiences typically less than one month (e.g., Aviram, 1984; Moloney, 2012) or classroom-based intercultural education programs, such as extended periods of intercultural contact activities over a school year (e.g., Glazier, 2003; Ngai & Koehn, 2010). However, Berwick and Whalley (2000) detail a three-month program in Japan involving Canadian secondary school students while Ngai and Koehn (2010) describe a two-year place-based intercultural learning program.

There has been some critique of cultural immersion approaches within intercultural educational literature. Doerr (2013) argues that the most common discourses informing experiential learning or “learning-by-doing”, such as study abroad and other immersion programs, potentially (1) contribute to the belief that intercultural learning can only be achieved overseas rather than locally or in a classroom context; (2) homogenise and immobilise people in the target culture; and (3) exoticise education in the target culture by positioning it as more ‘authentic’ than learning in the host culture. However, Doerr (2013)

concludes that an immersive “learning-by-doing” approach is not necessarily problematic; rather it becomes an issue if it focuses on learning about exotic “cultural others” (p. 240). This critique reiterates key issues for developing ICU (Walton et al., 2013) and optimal intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) as discussed above, particularly the need to reflect on one’s own culture, develop perspective-taking and challenge stereotypes. Furthermore, informing all of this is the fact that ICU is not simply a cognitive exercise but also involves affective interpersonal experiential learning (Walton et al., 2013; Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003). Thus, there remains a need to examine overseas cultural immersion programs in more detail in order to build knowledge and understanding of optimal ways to facilitate such activities. The following section examines examples of overseas cultural immersion school trips used by two Australian secondary schools drawing on intergroup contact theory and key factors promoting ICU. This will provide new insights about the extent to which the approach used for cultural immersion trips contributes to positive intergroup contact and ICU among school-aged students.

Methods and study context

The overall Intercultural Understanding Field Trial (ICUFT) was implemented in three phases:

- Phase 1 (February to April): School selection and recruitment process by DEECD. School “change teams” (school leaders, teachers and/or community members) organised to manage projects.
- Phase 2 (April to July): Change team attendance at DEECD project planning days and professional learning workshops.
- Phase 3 (July to December): School project implementation and evaluation.

As part of the ICUFT, a process-impact evaluation was conducted which forms the basis of this study (Walton, Paradies, Priest, Waters, Wertheim, Freeman, & Trinder, 2012). Research ethics approval for the study was granted by the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne (#1136502.1). For this paper, qualitative data from the two schools were derived mainly from two change team focus groups with six teachers and two principals; and two key informant interviews with a principal and teacher. The semi-structured focus groups and interviews did not specifically ask about Allport's (1954) criteria, allowing descriptions of the process and content to emerge spontaneously. School staff also completed process-impact field notes and provided project presentations from Phase 2, which included information about project planning and project aims, perceived value, content and observed or measured impacts. Researcher fieldnotes taken while attending the Phase 2 planning days were also used.

Focus groups and interviews were thematically analysed to compare key topics relating to intercultural exchange discussed within and across both school projects. Content analysis was also used with school project documents, focus groups and interviews to examine how the project was framed in terms of key objectives, types of activities, program structure and approaches to the intercultural exchange and perceived impacts. Distinct approaches to foster ICU through intergroup contact were used. Caladen College drew on a combination of unstructured, semi-structured and structured activities including classroom, community-based and tourist activities; whereas Greville College mainly used unstructured activities focusing on experiencing everyday local activities. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to refer to schools and participants.

Findings

Caladen College

Caladen College is a secondary school located in a predominantly Anglo-Celtic area in a regional area of southwestern Victoria. According to 2011 Australian Census data, the city has a population of approximately 10,715 with only 2% who speak a language other than English at home and 8% who were born overseas (ABS, 2011a). Comparatively, across Victoria, 23.1% of the population speak a language other than English at home and 31.4% were born overseas (ABS, 2011b). In July 2011, the school took a group of 27 students studying Indonesian in Years 9-12 to Yogyakarta, Indonesia to visit their sister school. The sister school partnership began in 2007. Over the years, the schools had organised teacher exchange visits and Australian host family stays, which were partly supported by “Becoming Asia Literate” grants funded by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The teachers saw the ICUFT as an opportunity to deepen the intercultural exchange and collaboration with their sister school. For their own field trial project, Caladen College had students (not participating in the trip) conduct pre-trip and post-trip interviews with their peers participating in the trip. Pre- and post-trip interviews were also conducted by staff members with parents of participating students. Three school staff formed the change team responsible for the project, which included the Principal “Margaret”, the Indonesian language teacher “Sarah” and the student wellbeing coordinator and science teacher “Andy”.

Preparation

During the preparation phase (Phase 2), a significant challenge that this school (and the other field trial schools) experienced was grasping the meaning of intercultural understanding and how they could develop this for their project. Andy explained it was just “getting your head

around the idea of defining intercultural understanding [and] how that was going to work”, also adding that “because it’s such a short timeline, it takes a while to process all of that” (Teacher FG). This school had regular team meetings throughout the project and also attended all DEECD planning days in an effort to align their project with the aims of developing students’ ICU.

There was also substantial preparation prior to the trip including parent, student and family consultations, discussions with school council as well as a short visit by Sarah to the Indonesian school to collaborate and plan with the teachers. Teachers commented that for many students, it was not only their first trip overseas, it was also their first trip outside their town as some had not even been to their state capital, Melbourne (350km from their school). Moreover, most of the community have Anglo-Celtic backgrounds with little opportunity to have direct contact with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. One teacher explained, “We were very conscious that we wanted to ensure the community interest and involvement in not just the sister school visit but [to] give our community global perspectives on things. That’s been a really important thing [...] many have never travelled overseas” (Teacher FG).

The school held comprehensive pre-program after-school information sessions with parents, students and the whole family so that “they had no doubts about [anything], even going to line up at the airport [...] To me, that pre-tour preparation was absolutely critical” (Teacher FG). Parents were given direct e-mail access to their child’s host parents in Indonesia and provided advice to assist with their child’s travel preparation such as insurance, passports and phones. The LOTE (Language Other Than English) teacher, Sarah, also provided advice to teachers in Indonesia to help host families understand aspects of Australian culture. This intercultural exchange was supported using student information packs so both Australian and Indonesian students had prior information about each other’s cultural customs and practices to facilitate intergroup contact during the trip. Further

preparation for Australian students included the opportunity to speak with an Indonesian native speaker and lessons focused on everyday life in Indonesia such as forms of public interaction and behaviour. Along with the Australian students' knowledge of Indonesia and basic Bahasa Indonesian language capabilities through LOTE classes, this pre-cultural exchange helped provide a foundation for Indonesian and Australian students to understand each other.

The trip

The students and teachers visited the Indonesian school for 16 days. The central project questions informing the sister school trip, developed to understand the ICU impacts of the cultural immersion trip, included:

- "What difference, if any, does participating in a bilingual immersion sister school visit have on our staff and students' ICU?"
- "How does students working collaboratively on an Essential Question while studying at their sister school impact on their ICU?"

In a school document about the trip, some key aims presented to students and families included:

- To learn about Javanese and Balinese arts and crafts
- To appreciate another lifestyle
- To enable students to further develop and experiment with their Indonesian language skills
- To establish relationships with other students on the trip, Indonesian students and other Indonesian people which will hopefully be ongoing.

The first stage of the trip (six days) was spent in Bali with day trips to surrounding areas. The teachers organised the trip this way so students could adapt to being in another country and different cultural context “rather than have the wind down in Bali afterwards” (Teacher FG). These six days fulfilled the first two aims, to build cultural knowledge and begin to experience a different lifestyle while practising language skills. Students and teachers stayed at the same hostel; with activities mainly centred on “touristic” activities such as market shopping, attending dance performances and visiting Hindu temples and art museums. Later, they spent a day volunteering at a local orphanage. Throughout the day, students were supervised by their teachers. This stage was highly structured, including meal times, but students had free time in groups with mobile phones so they could contact their teachers any time.

The rest of the trip was in Yogyakarta at their sister school. While in Bali, students and teachers stayed together in a hostel. In Yogyakarta, each individual student stayed with a different host family, spending most of their time with their host brother or sister and Indonesian classmates, with minimal contact with Australian teachers. They started school at 7 a.m. daily and spent half the day in classrooms and the other half on school activities or school excursions in the village. They attended school and participated in collaborative classroom activities with Indonesian students. From the start, the activities centred on an “Essential Question”, which is a pedagogical approach toward inquiry-based learning aiming to “probe the deep and often confounding issues [...] that elude simple answers” (McKenzie, 2005, p. 85). The plan was for students to work collaboratively for one study period (45 minutes) each day developing and working through their Essential Question, however this proved challenging. Initially, students and teachers needed to negotiate different teaching styles; as Margaret commented, “the Indonesian students found it really hard to deal with inquiry-based learning and not directed learning ... The [Indonesian] teachers were like,

‘Well, Sarah, what do you want them to do next?’ (Teacher FG). The Australian teachers suggested that one reason the Essential Question task was difficult to start with was because the inquiry-based pedagogical approach was an unfamiliar teaching style at the Indonesian school. While the inquiry-based approach was discussed before the trip during Sarah’s visit, it was still an initial challenge implementing this in classroom practice. One of the main difficulties for a few of the Australian teachers, as Margaret observed, was learning how to co-teach a class with teachers whose first language was not English. In addition to different pedagogical approaches, Margaret described some initial “shyness” from Australian students who “didn’t want to just be forceful and say, here’s what we’re going to do” (Teacher FG).

Upon reflection after the trip, Margaret suggested it was important to create common ground by learning more about each other on an individual level before tackling an Essential Question. Some students started with questions to get to know each other personally, such as talking about sport and “teenage life in general” (Teacher FG). While Sarah explained that students were initially matched to help them get along better, in one instance, a pair of students could not agree on an Essential Question and did not seem to be “hitting it off”. Sarah described how she helped the students think of alternative strategies to come to agreement:

I actually had to step in and say, "Here's your topic" because they couldn't actually come to an agreement as to what they wanted to do, so it did take me stepping in. Another process I asked them to go through as well was if they did have a topic they each wanted to do, [they could] break it down and see if there were similarities between the two topics [and] that they could then do that instead. So that worked really well (Teacher FG).

By reinforcing an authorising environment that supported collaborative work toward a common goal, this teacher helped promote a positive intergroup contact experience.

The teachers observed that after these initial negotiations, students became more invested in the Essential Question activity, which involved topics such as developing

approaches to care for the environment. Additionally, after the Australian teachers explained their inquiry-based approach, the Indonesian teachers and students could understand the activity and what they needed to do. One teacher said, “It was like we'd opened up a floodgate and they could just go for it and really express who they were and then question our students on what they do as well” (Teacher FG). Sarah also commented that the pre-trip information packs she provided to Australian and Indonesian students seemed to influence positive interactions.

The actual interaction between kids too, you could just notice straightaway [...]. They were very mindful of that [e.g., different types of cultural behaviours and practices] and very understanding of that. [...] The Indonesian students were very supportive when it came to helping them with classroom stuff as well. So if they were in a class and the Australian student was struggling a bit they'd help them out as well. (Teacher FG)

At the trip's end, Sarah explained that the trip helped solidify and foster new friendships, “Friendship-wise, I mean, it took me half an hour to get them into the airport because they didn't want to leave at the end, and that's obviously the main thing as well” (Teacher FG).

Observed impacts

In addition to new friendships, teachers observed other positive impacts based on comments from the student-to-student post-study tour interviews. Some students talked about learning to be flexible in unfamiliar situations: “It was easy to adapt to a different culture” and “I learnt I could cope in new situations”. A few also expressed how it was strange being seen as someone “different” and being “treated differently”. In response to one question, “How did you cope with being ‘different’ in a different culture?”, another student demonstrated perspective-taking and cultural reflexivity, saying “It was difficult at times because Australians do things so differently”. For Andy, this last comment illustrated the profound shifts some of the students experienced by participating in the sister school trip:

She was seeing her own culture from a totally different perspective [...] I think that could only have happened because she'd actually been immersed in that culture and interacted and negotiated with people from that culture, had that experience. (Teacher FG)

Throughout their trip, students were supported to have different types of interactions from more indirect and highly structured interactions at the start of their trip to less structured interactions at the sister school and more informal everyday experiences with host families.

Teachers also observed increased student academic engagement in their studies following the trip; teachers observed students who had previously been somewhat disengaged from studies expressing greater interest in learning Indonesian and demonstrating increased motivation in other subjects. For example, Sarah noted, “They have a vested interest now in their subjects because they have a personal interest in their subjects. They have a personal connection through their subjects so it makes a huge difference to them” (Teacher FG).

Margaret added that another noticeable difference in class is “the way they express different views. They're kind of showing intercultural understanding” (Teacher FG).

During interviews, some parents talked about the perceived value of their child’s trip, “None of us has travelled overseas before” and “See it [Indonesia] from the perspective of a family member”. In this way, pre-conceived, perhaps more negative representations, of Indonesia were challenged by direct experiences of a family member. One teacher explained this impact:

You've got the parent whose knowledge of Indonesia is probably limited to media, which is primarily negative, but now people who have bought suitcases, got their passports and they're planning to travel there. That's a massive shift for some of these people and within a small community if that's six or seven families who do that; that has an enormous influence. (Teacher FG)

In an interview, one parent said, “Now we're having an idea to go overseas”. The school’s original plans to involve parents and families from the outset seemed to have a positive effect

by increasing openness toward Indonesia and support amongst parents themselves. Margaret described, “There was a lot more ease for the parents. I think they even had some kind of informal catching up themselves ...while their kids were away, so they kind of formed their own parent community around the whole thing as well” (Teacher FG). According to a 2006 Victorian survey data from the “Challenging Racism” project (n=4,016) (Forrest & Dunn, 2007), 36% reported there were groups who did not fit into Australian society and of these respondents, “the most frequently mentioned groups were Muslim Victorians (34% of mentions) and people from the Middle East (21%) and Asia (12% of mentions)” (VicHealth, 2007, p. 36). Given these findings, the fact that some families were making plans to go overseas and seemed more open to Indonesia is significant.

In terms of future plans, Caladen School intends to continue yearly teacher exchanges with their sister school and maintain regular communication through information and communications technologies so students at both schools can continue to build language capabilities and work with each other through joint projects. The school hopes to continue student cultural immersion trips to Indonesia.

Greville College

Greville College is a combined (primary and secondary levels) school in a predominantly Anglo-Celtic area on Victoria’s southeast coast, approximately 100km from Melbourne. The school is located in a regional city with a population of 15,042, where 3% speak a language other than English at home and 12% were born overseas, mostly in the United Kingdom (ABS, 2011a). Comparatively, in Melbourne, 29.1% speak a language other than English at home and 36.7% were born overseas. Similar to Caladen College, school demographics include mostly Anglo-Celtic students, with a few Aboriginal students. The school identified several school programs, curricula and activities that support knowledge about other cultures

and ICU. These include a series of “Asian Studies” units for Year 9 students, Indonesian language program, multicultural festival days, sister school programs and intercultural initiatives such as organising host family stays for visiting international students with local families while attending classes at the school. Teachers are also supported to visit sister schools and attend professional learning workshops to develop their ICU. The change team consisted of the Principal “Denise”, the Asian Studies teacher “Sam”, an Indonesian teacher “Hannah”, an assistant principal and two other teachers.

Preparation

Despite the school’s support for engaging students in learning about cultural diversity, the principal and teachers felt that students were mostly complacent about engaging with cultural diversity. Therefore, they stated, their project hoped to enliven and deepen students’ interest and further develop their ICU through self-reflection. The project team chose to deepen their East Timorese sister school relationship. In addition to the formal sister school connections, the main teacher, Hannah, who organised the trip, had personal family connections to the village where the school is located. In preparation for the school trip, the principal and assistant principal visited to assess the location’s safety for students given previous unrest within the region. Through an application process, eight Year 9 students were selected to participate in a cultural immersion trip to the sister school. Six students were studying Indonesian, which is considered a “working language” in East Timor since many younger people were educated in Indonesian (East Timor Government, 2012).

Students were involved from the start by helping to fundraise for the trip. Teachers commented that the fundraising “was the start of a cohesive process we hadn’t had in our school before” because it brought students from different peer groups together to achieve

their fundraising goals (Teacher FG). They also observed that this helped to involve parents and other community members to understand more about the trip and why they were going.

In planning the trip, Hannah decided to take an unstructured approach, unlike typical study tours with a set agenda and highly structured activities. Instead, the main purpose of the tour was for students to experience everyday life in the sister school and the school's village. In preparation, students learnt about cultural behaviors and practices and how to be respectful in different types of interactions.

The trip

In October 2011, the students visited their sister school in East Timor for twelve days and stayed with host families who were members of Hannah's husband's family. Rather than having planned activities, the students were encouraged to become involved in the community's everyday activities. The intention was to be as immersed as possible in the local context or to "go with the flow of what people do every day" (Teacher FG). During part of the day, the students would typically practise learning Indonesian. The rest of the day was mainly determined by what was happening in the village. A teacher compared her recent experience on a professional learning study tour to India with their school cultural immersion trip:

It's not like study tours, at 8 o'clock breakfast, 9 o'clock we go there, at 10 o'clock we go to a museum. It was quite challenging for us as a group because the students were like, "What are we going to do next? What are we going to do next? What's the time?" "It's 1 o'clock" and it was often, "Well no there is no plan. What do you want to do?" There wasn't structured entertainment for them and it was challenging for us as teachers as well to have a group of students [asking], "What are we going to do next?" and we said, "Go and play". (Teacher FG)

The teachers explained that it was remarkably different from a structured school environment with carefully planned timetables. In an interview, Sam, the Asian Studies teacher, added that

it was good for the students to take a break from their usual “jam-packed” days of school, after-school activities and sport. Reflecting on the trip she commented, “I think that’s the whole point of it. Just there is nothing. There is no time and there is no place you have to be, because that’s the whole intercultural understanding in itself ... our notion of time” (Interview).

However, teachers were still in a position of authority and they stressed the importance of Australian students interacting with East Timorese students and community members, instead of keeping to themselves. This provided an authorising environment with expected forms of engagement. Depending on what was happening, teachers involved the students in daily activities, such as walking a few kilometers to the local market before sunrise. Hannah explained that as they were walking through the villages, they took time to just observe what was happening and stop to talk to people. She said, “Because I know lots of people there, we would just go, ‘Come on, let’s just go and say hello to this person’, but every so often it would involve, in East Timor you sit down [and stay awhile]” (Teacher FG). In this way, Hannah was able to act as a cultural intermediary to bridge the gap between students and East Timorese. In other informal situations, there were spontaneous opportunities when teachers suggested ways that students could engage with people in the village. Hannah described a situation when the students were playing Uno (a card game). She recalled telling them, “‘Well you sit in here just by yourself. Come on, let’s call those kids and you teach them how to do this’ or ‘Call the cousins and sit down with them and teach them how to play’. So we would then end up with a mixed group playing Uno together” (Teacher FG). A few teachers explained that it was “all those little things” and “those stretches of time” that were important:

We did have activities and we did a lot of nature trails where foreigners normally wouldn’t be able to go because they just wouldn’t know. So we saw where people go everyday to their fields and what they do there and seeing the Timorese carry these heavy

loads. So we told those students, “Come on ask that lady to carry her loads” and it was all those little things. (Teacher FG)

The teachers’ directions helped involve students in subtle ways so they were supported to go out of their comfort zone.

In addition to impromptu activities, the teachers emphasised that “down time” for students to reflect and think about what they were experiencing was important (Teacher FG). Even though there was a lot of unstructured time, the experience of living in the village was challenging because it was an unfamiliar way of doing things. As a result, in addition to unstructured time experiencing everyday life with people in the village, a teacher explained, “They needed time out from the trip”. Another teacher explained, “They sometimes just disappeared in their rooms. [...] It was like they did not want to engage in the program” (Teacher FG).

Observed impacts

Before the trip, Sam recalled one of the students telling her, “I don’t want to go. I can’t go on the Timor trip” and when asked why, she said, “I just don’t feel comfortable with it. None of my friends are going. I don’t want to go” (Teacher Interview). Sam encouraged her and reassured her that she wouldn’t regret going. The student did participate, and afterwards said that she wanted to go back again. Sam explained why, “She’s made friends with the family of where she was staying and I said, ‘What about learning the language?’ and she said, ‘Yeah, I want to keep learning Indonesian so I can go back and talk to them again’ and she just said it was the most amazing thing” (Teacher Interview). Other teachers also talked about the friendships students made and their renewed interest in learning Indonesian.

The change team also commented that some students expressed an appreciation for being happy with less emphasis on materialism. Denise and Hannah recalled a student saying:

I've learnt that you can be happy with nothing. I've learnt that they play soccer on dirt ground over stones in bare feet and sometimes not even a soccer ball. [...] You come to Australia and everyone is grumpy and you go there and they have nothing and you never find someone who just is not in the right mood (Teacher FG).

While perhaps idealising his experiences in East Timor, it is interesting that he was able to think critically about Australian culture rather than criticising the East Timorese village for not having the things he was accustomed to in Australia.

Based on the positive experiences and some profound changes the teachers observed in the students, they hope to continue taking students to visit the sister school and start partnerships with sister schools in other countries. Sam reflected that it is now important to build on what they have established, "It's no good doing a one-off. In my opinion your program has to have a sustainable aspect to it" (Teacher Interview).

Discussion

This paper aimed to examine exploratory data about a short-term cultural immersion trip to an overseas 'sister school' by drawing on theoretical and empirical literature on intergroup contact and intercultural understanding in order to compare and contrast different approaches. Some of the observed impacts from the teachers' perspectives suggest the value of sister school exchanges if allowed time for sufficient preparation and critical reflection as well as opportunities to develop friendships; recognised as an especially important aspect of positive intergroup contact (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). Teachers also highlighted that long-term engagement was important to continue to build intercultural understanding while being supported in the curriculum, at a whole-school level and by the wider

community.

There were positive aspects of both the structured and the unstructured approaches to the sister school trips. Both sister school trips were supported by adequate resources, facilitative school leadership and teacher capability and knowledge to ensure the trip was well organised with positive impacts for the students. Findings from previous exploratory studies (Pica-Smith, 2009; Schuitema & Veugelers, 2011) demonstrate the potential for negative impacts on intergroup contact and intercultural understanding if programs and associated activities are not well thought-out, planned and managed to facilitate optimal contact. In parallel, Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis found programs with more attention paid to Allport's optimal conditions had better outcomes.

Greville College placed greater emphasis on having time for reflection and being immersed in the everyday life of the village, not only focused on school-based activities. Caladen College organised the trip so that students could have time to gradually adapt to being in a very different cultural environment from what they were used to. This meant initially engaging in more structured 'touristic' activities and then staying with host families and having little contact with their Australian teachers for the rest of the trip. The amount and type of preparation will of course vary between different groups of students and schools. However, there were common factors that may have contributed to the positive impacts of the trips: adequate preparation, activities that reflected Allport's (1954) intergroup contact principles, potential for friendship and time for reflection (including perspective-taking and cultural reflexivity).

In terms of reducing negative factors that might prevent positive intergroup contact (e.g., anxiety) (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), preparation seemed to play a major role. Preparation helped students feel less nervous about living in a country that was mostly unknown to them, particularly, as a Caladen College teacher pointed out, when what was

known mostly related to negative media representations of the host countries. Pre-trip preparation was discussed as a key focus for Caladen College. On reflection, Hannah at Greville College felt that next time, she would spend more time preparing students to have a deeper understanding of East Timorese culture. Allport (1954) identified that a student's readiness is a key factor when determining whether or not new information will result in positive attitudinal change. To reiterate, Barlow and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that negative intergroup experiences have a stronger impact on reinforcing prejudicial attitudes than the impact of positive experiences on reducing prejudicial attitudes.

While the sister school trips were not designed with Allport's contact principles in mind, the intergroup activities teachers at Caladen College described reflected some of those principles, such as collaborative work toward a common goal and establishing an authorising environment for positive interactions to occur. Additionally, as was the case with Caladen College, there were explicit attempts to ensure equal status amongst the two groups of students, such as in the pre-trip preparation about cultural differences. While building cultural knowledge was crucial, it also seemed important for students to have the opportunity to get to know someone on an interpersonal level. A meta-analytic review of contact studies found that cultural knowledge about others has little impact on reducing outgroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Instead, other factors such as reducing intergroup anxiety and supporting positive group identity alongside intergroup friendship can have a significant impact on prejudice reduction (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012). This also supports previous research that it is important to have both interpersonal and intergroup contact while maintaining some group distinctions so that individual people within the group are not seen as exceptions, thus maintaining group stereotypes (Kenworthy et al., 2005).

The interpersonal interactions not only created more "intimate" forms of contact, they also worked to develop an understanding of intra-group diversity to counter group

stereotypes. Likewise, at a bi-lingual/bi-cultural school in Israel, Glazier (2003) found that it was important for students to engage “in one another’s company” (p. 144) rather than limiting interaction to brief contact encounters. Experiential place-based learning with supported interpersonal and intergroup contact also had positive impacts among primary students in the U.S., who reported increased knowledge about local Native American histories and cultures, resulting in lessened stereotypes and fostering a desire to have Native American friends (Ngai & Koehn, 2010). The study found that the interpersonal connection helped students and teachers to “connect with and find ways to build constructive relationships involving people whose cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are different from their own” (Ngai & Koehn, 2010, p. 604).

In our study, challenging students in significant ways so that they could reflect on their own worldview and cultural practices appeared to be important, as was providing strong support during this process. Teachers worked to create an authorising environment so that students knew what was expected of them during group interactions. In the case of Caladen College, a teacher intervened when students were having difficulty agreeing (on the Essential Question) and were supported to think of topics they could talk about familiar to both (e.g., sport). In this example, negative feelings and difficult circumstances were managed and diffused, enabling the students to work through their differences and interact positively. An example from Greville College was the Australian students teaching their East Timorese peers to play Uno, thus crossing group boundaries in an activity where the students could have fun while getting to know each other. These activities helped build familiarity on both personal and group levels. In addition to providing support for students’ intercultural understanding, it also seemed important for teachers to have the skills and support to reflect on their own teaching practice in relation to other approaches as demonstrated by the Caladen teachers’ experiences.

The purpose of the ICUFT was for schools to experiment with different approaches to developing students' intercultural understanding. These sister school projects used situations and activities where students could not only learn about other cultures, but also develop ICU skills such as cultural reflexivity, perspective-taking and language abilities. Time for reflection and time to process what they were experiencing were reported by both schools as key factors. Greville College took a more unstructured approach and allowed for more "down time". They found that this was necessary for students to have the capacity to not only critically reflect on their own cultural worldview but also to enter and leave social activities of the village as needed. Opportunities to withdraw might have helped students relax rather than constantly be challenged by unfamiliar cultural differences. Comparatively, Caladen College placed more emphasis on supporting students to gradually become more "immersed" in an unstructured environment with increasingly less supervision from teachers. This may have had a similar effect to allowing for periods of withdrawal in an already unstructured environment.

Consistent with transformative learning theory that emphasises "learning in the midst of novel life experience" (Berwick & Whalley, 2000, p. 327), reflection appears crucial to experiential learning in a cultural immersion context. Based on Canadian high school students' "culture learning journals" during a cultural immersion trip in Japan, Berwick and Whalley (2000) conclude that "learners' linking of their social encounters with focused reflection is the kind of supplement to experience *per se* [authors' emphasis] in intercultural settings that [...] contributes to the chances of gaining deeper insights" (p. 337). Students demonstrated different types of reflection including content reflection (about what is perceived), process reflection (about how things are perceived) and premise reflection (understanding why we perceive things in certain ways) (Berwick & Whalley, 2000). Findings from our study, particularly the approach used by Greville College, support the

premise that intercultural learning “entails a subtle balance among observation, interaction and various degrees of reflection on experience” (Berwick & Whalley, 2000, p. 328).

While it is possible to develop intercultural understanding within one’s own cultural context by experiencing intra-cultural diversity (Hansell, 2000; Riskowski & Olbricht, 2010), findings from this study suggest that the cultural contrast in a significantly different context has potential to profoundly impact upon cultural reflexivity. However, as Allport (1954) explained, intergroup contact itself does not automatically result in positive attitudes. Similarly, experience itself does not result in critical reflection on one’s own culture or positive attitudes toward another culture (Doerr, 2013). Furthermore, it is possible that the more intense and confronting a situation, the more important it is to have adequate preparation and support. With Caladen College, the teachers made a significant effort to allay the students’ and parents’ anxieties about the trip. They also liaised with the Indonesian teachers to help prepare their students for when the Australian students visited. Both Caladen and Greville College utilised intergroup activities in an authorising environment that supported students’ engagement with each other.

Immersion trips can potentially be criticised for promoting intercultural understanding in the minority of students who participate directly in the trip. However, it should be noted that Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) have found increases in favourable attitudes towards ‘outgroups’ can generalise beyond those with direct intergroup contact. Consistent with those findings, teachers reported more positive attitudes in parents, who began planning their own overseas visits, and activities that became more school-wide (e.g., fund-raising, reporting on the visit) meant the effects were broader than on those with direct contact.

While schools did not label their efforts as addressing Allport’s (1954) optimal conditions, they described a range of strategies consistent with that approach. Given evidence supporting contact theory principles and associated factors (Pettigrew & Tropp,

2006), we would recommend an explicit mapping of elements when planning future immersion programs. Table 1 provides a potential method for mapping school immersion activity components more systematically; with examples provided from the two schools' approaches [Insert table 1 about here].

Limitations

There were limitations to the field trial and data that could be collected. It would have been useful to understand the students' perspectives about their experiences rather than only assessing this through teacher observations. While Caladen College collected some data from students and parents through pre- and post-trip interviews, this data was for internal school use only and not accessible to the research team. However, teachers described their conclusions based on this data in interviews and focus groups. Additional data such as further details about the preparation material used with students and parents were also limited to internal school use. Due to the short timeframe of the field trial and school end-of-year commitments, follow up data was not able to be collected. Future research needs to conduct greater follow up of effects of immersion activities such as these over time.

In terms of the project content of the sister school trips, while students were prepared for particular differences in cultural practices and behaviours, the extent to which students were supported to reflect on ethnocentric prejudices was not clear. Other studies found that critically addressing prejudice and racism when it happens is necessary for positive intergroup relations (Zirkel, 2008; Pica-Smith, 2009). Among 4th and 5th grade students, Pica-Smith (2009) found that teachers who did not address racism in the classroom impeded the potential for intergroup friendship. In a review that examined the extent to which empirical studies effectively incorporated Banks' critical multicultural education principles, Zirkel

(2008) found that for multicultural education to be effective, it needs to thoughtfully address race, ethnicity and power and its relevance in society and students' lives.

Schools were also limited by the field trial's short timeframe. As identified in a previous review (Walton et al., 2013), it would have been useful to explore the longer-term effects of the sister school cultural immersion trips for students. For example, it would have been interesting to assess changes in attitudes toward cultural diversity over time to understand whether the teacher's observed short-term changes extended to longer-term attitudinal as well as behavioural changes.

Concluding remarks

These findings support previous studies that considered the impacts of intergroup contact in school-based classroom settings but also add to the literature by providing an understanding of how this is actualised for secondary school students in "real-world" settings outside of the classroom. By analysing the sister school trips in relation to Allport's intergroup contact principles and key factors supporting ICU, different elements that supported positive impacts on students' ICU were identified. Crucially, three key factors which were emphasised, to different degrees, by both schools contributed to this: (1) adequate preparation before the trip and supported activities during the trip aimed at reducing negative factors that might impede positive intergroup contact (emphasised by Caladen College's more structured approach), (2) potential for increased familiarity, liking and friendship through intimate interpersonal and intergroup contact (implemented by both schools), and (3) time for reflection to support cultural reflexivity and perspective-taking (emphasised by Greville College's more unstructured approach).

To conclude, there is a need for further more in-depth research to understand the nuanced interactions and experiences in intergroup situations during sister school exchanges

from the perspectives of both schools. Furthermore, this area of research would benefit from ethnographic research to support a richer understanding of sister school partnerships as well as to assess changes and impacts based on continued engagement over time. Finally, this research suggests the need for professional development for teachers to reflect on their own intercultural understanding so that they can, in turn, support their students in these efforts.

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Table 1. Mapping Immersion Activities onto Interpersonal Contact Theory Principles (Allport, 1954, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006): Using Activity Examples from Two Schools.

Facilitating factors	“Caladen” College	“Greville” College
Intimate (rather than superficial) contact	Living with host family; attending classes in Sister School and engaging with in structured educational activities. Actively engaging in volunteer activities at a local orphanage.	Living in local village, teacher encourages students to engage with wide variety of community members and Sister School students. Australian teacher coordinating trip has strong ties to Sister School Community, enabling contact.
Group differences are salient	The context of Sister School visit is framed as opportunity to better understand different cultural group. Extensive, pre-trip preparatory information about cultural differences provided to students in both Sister Schools	The context of Sister School visit is framed as opportunity to better understand different cultural group and their language. In preparation, students learn about cultural behaviours and practices and how to be respectful in different types of interactions.

<p>Cooperative work towards shared goal</p>	<p>Essential Question activity planned cooperatively with teaching staff in Sister School and student teams work together to address mutually agreed issue.</p> <p>Student pre-trip cultural knowledge increases cooperative behaviour.</p>	<p>Students from both schools share goal of improving mutual language skills. Participation in community activities.</p>
<p>Equal status</p>	<p>Students attend classes together - teachers from both schools co-teach. Students participate in joint inquiry-based activity to develop and answer an Essential Question.</p>	<p>Students each learn from each other, sharing information and skills (e.g., about new card game, language)</p>
<p>Authorising social environment supporting prejudice reduction</p>	<p>School contributions to promoting and preparing for immersion activity. Teacher encouragement of contact and cooperation.</p>	<p>School contributions to promoting and preparing for immersion activity. Teacher encouragement of contact and cooperation.</p>

<p>Opportunity for reflection</p>	<p>Pre and post-trip interview activity encouraging student reflection on intercultural understanding.</p>	<p>School goal is for students to self-reflect about cultural diversity and this is communicated. Students encouraged to take time out, with aim to encourage reflection.</p>
<p>Addressing anxiety and safety concerns</p>	<p>One teacher visits Sister School prior to trip.</p> <p>Pre-trip preparation developing knowledge, language skills and accurate expectations of the new culture, provided to students and family members.</p> <p>Phase one of trip involves ‘touristic’ activities so students adapt to new environment, prior to staying separately with host families.</p>	<p>Principal and Assistant Principal visit Sister School prior to trip to assess safety of the community.</p> <p>Australian teacher coordinating project has strong ties with the Sister School Community.</p> <p>During the trip, students can withdraw from the unfamiliar cultural environment for periods of time.</p>