

EDUCATING FOR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Australians are being encouraged to know more about Asia yet in Australia there is evidence of a backlash against multiculturalism which is fuelled in part by ignorance. The future of rural economies may depend upon our ability to create ties between rural Australia and our Asian neighbours and customers. This article describes the Australia-Indonesia Rural Education Program (AIREP) which was designed to increase mutual understanding between Indonesian trainee teachers and rural communities in western NSW.

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In November 1994 leaders of 18 nations of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum met in Bogor and agreed to the elimination of trade barriers by 2020. Also in 1994 the Council of Australian Governments argued the importance of an increasing recognition of Australia's economic interests in the greater promotion of Asian Languages and Asian Studies in Australian schools (Bartlett et al 1996). Probably no sector of Australian society will feel the economic impact of Australia's relations with Asia more than the rural community. Seven of Australia's top ten food export markets are in East Asia and our market share there is growing (Urban, 1996). In 1996/6 Australia's food trade surplus with Asia was \$5.9 billion (McEachern, 1996). However, rural schools have been poorly placed to respond to demands to introduce Asian languages and Asian Studies in their curriculums.

Whereas in urban areas students and teachers have many opportunities to access native speakers of Asian languages and cultural centres like consulates, mosques, temples, restaurants and Asian supermarkets, rural communities do not. Nor do they have the same access to Asian tourists or immigrants, as both groups have tended to be located disproportionately in urban centres.

Since 1992 the Asia Education Foundation has been funded by the Commonwealth government with the responsibility for promoting and supporting the study of Asia across all curriculum areas in Australian schools. Its contribution has been an impressive one in terms of production of curriculum resources, partnerships with educational authorities and implementation of strategies in a national network of selected 'magnet schools'. Interestingly however, the 'magnet schools' have also tended to be in urban areas. Of the fifty-three magnet schools in NSW for example, none is west of the Blue Mountains (Baumgart & Elliott, 1996).

In 1996, the public response to the political controversy surrounding views expressed by Pauline Hanson, the federal Member for Oxley, was instructive (Hanson 1996). Clearly significant sections of the Australia community still harboured racist views which they considered had been legitimised by the debate over immigration policy and multiculturalism. (Lesser 1996). Equally clear was the financial costs of the racism debate to Australian tourism and exports. If no better reason for tolerance could be found than economic self interest, the implications were serious.

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This paper describes a successful program designed to promote greater mutual understanding between teacher education students from one Asian country, Indonesia, and students from one section of the rural community, western New South Wales.

BACKGROUND

Fourteen Australian universities provide opportunities for their teacher education students to undertake teaching practicums in Asia (Hill & Thomas, 1995). Since 1989 students from Charles Sturt University's School of Teacher Education have had the opportunity to undertake their final year teaching practicum in Indonesia, under the auspices of Institut Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan (IKIP) Yogyakarta, a highly regarded teacher education institution in Central Java. IKIP Yogyakarta had expressed the hope that, at some time, finance might be found to enable some of their students to return the visit of the CSU students and learn something of Australian society and its education system. While it is not uncommon for students from affluent countries like Japan to spend time as guests of Australian schools, opportunities for Indonesian teacher education students, or, for that matter, teachers, to travel overseas are rare indeed. For Indonesians, overseas travel is a luxury normally reserved for senior government officials and the affluent elite. Most student teachers in Indonesia come from rural or lower middle class backgrounds where incomes would never be sufficient to permit overseas travel. In 1993 CSU approached the Australia-Indonesia Institute (AII) for funding to enable a group of students from IKIP's English Department to visit Australia and spend a month teaching in rural NSW communities. The AII agreed to finance the Australia-Indonesia Rural Education Program (AIREP) and, in June 1994, the first AIREP group of seven student teachers arrived in Australia. Following the success of the 1994 program, the AII funded a second AIREP in 1995 and in 1996 the AII introduced a national program, the Australia-Indonesia Rural Areas Education Scheme (AIRAES), opening the program to universities based in rural areas throughout Australia. This paper discusses aspects of the program in 1994 and 1995.

AIREP represented a creative attempt to link a number of institutions and groups for the benefit of rural students. IKIP Yogyakarta was responsible for selecting participants and providing a cultural orientation program for the students including Australian culture and geography and preparation of appropriate lessons for Australian rural schools. The Australia-Indonesia Institute provided funding and advice. The Department of School Education, Western Region, liaised with those schools teaching Bahasa Indonesia, allocated students to groups of schools and organised the staff development day where AIREP students worked with staff from their host schools. CSU staff co-ordinated the program. However the major role in the program's success was played by those schools and families who hosted the students during their stay in rural communities.

THE PROGRAM

The students arrived in Sydney in late July. They were met by staff from CSU and, after some orientation in Sydney, were taken to Bathurst where they participated in a staff development day for teachers of Indonesian in the Western Region. During this day they conducted conversation classes in Bahasa Indonesia, demonstrated a variety of Indonesian dances, met the teachers who were to be their hosts in the three weeks in rural schools and participated in planning activities for their program. At the end of the day they dispersed and were taken to their host towns.



AIREP students teaching dance to NSW teachers.

Over the next three weeks they stayed with families from the host school community and taught lessons in Indonesian language and culture in local schools. Then, after a short visit to Canberra, and two days in Bathurst assisting with a residential school for teachers studying Indonesian by distance education, they departed from Sydney in late August.

The schools in which the students taught ranged in size from large secondary schools in centres like Dubbo, four hundred kilometres west of Sydney to one-teacher schools like Gunningbland. The rural location presented some cultural problems for the Indonesian guests. The students experienced what was to them extreme isolation. Most came from Java where the population density approaches a hundred persons per square kilometre (Madya, 1992) and they often found themselves in small towns, three to five hundred kilometres from Sydney and up to two hours drive from the nearest fellow Indonesian speaker. Most were Muslims and anxious to avoid pork in their diet. Contact with dogs is considered undesirable by Muslims and many of the students were hosted on farms where working dogs were a valued part of the enterprise. The students had some concerns about the inaccessibility of mosques for their religious observances.

OUTCOMES

For their hosts, these cultural and religious requirements provided a valuable learning experience and genuine efforts were made by guests and hosts to understand each other's customs and the reasons for them. *'Most of the hosts have already prepared everything before my coming. They understood my culture in eating, praying etc.'* (Arifin)

The program was evaluated in a variety of ways. The Indonesian students kept diaries, teaching journals, answered an open-ended questionnaire and participated in a group evaluation session in Canberra at the end of the school experience. Teacher hosts took part in a teleconferenced

evaluation session and provided written feedback about the program. However, unfortunately no systematic attempt was made to evaluate the effect of the program upon the students in the 47 schools visited by AIREP students. Overall one measure of the success of AIREP was the keenness of all the 1994 participating hosts to be involved again in 1995. Another indication is the enthusiasm of IKIP to continue the program when funding is available.

Few of the students in the host schools had previously had close personal contact with Indonesians, or, for that matter, other Asians. The AIREP students had not anticipated the low levels of awareness revealed by so many of the children's questions e.g. 'Do you have mirrors in Indonesia?' 'Do you have any hair under that scarf (jilbab)?'

One major outcome was to dramatically increase the knowledge of the Indonesian student teachers about Australian cultural, educational and geographic diversity.

Some students stayed with as many as 4 or 5 families. Generally they found the home stays a very rewarding experience despite the geographical isolation. They gained a favourable image of Australian rural communities and rural schools and appreciated the hospitality they received.

The students experienced some of the diversity of rural Australia. They threw snow balls. They observed some of Australia's wildlife in visits to fauna reserves and a number of farms. Arifin visited the Mudgee Small Farms Field Day. Agus bogged the tractor. Yohana went to a CWA meeting.

Individual student's activities varied according to their location. Agus was based in Oberon. *'Some unexpected activities I should do 1) visited some parents of the school's students to have dinner party. 2) went to farm and collected wood for fire. Even in Indonesia I never collect wood for fire. 3) visited timber factory' (Agus)*

The creativity of the Australian teachers and the involvement of adults in continuing education were commented upon favourably. *'Almost in every house there are a lot of books and usually there always be general knowledge books. Australians will always learn something however old they are ... A lot of parents still go to school and continue their study to university' (Yudi)*

I could see from the way how they put their effort in making the lesson they teach such an interesting, challenging, effective one and also their effort in making the students progress. The situation/ atmosphere of the class impressed me much. In class, the teachers always encourage the students to speak up, expressing ideas/ opinion and to be active and critical as well as discipline.' (Wiwied)

Coming from a country where there is a dramatic difference in the provision for schools in rural and urban areas and where lack of rural electrification makes use of sophisticated electronic communications in schools very rare, they were also impressed by the access of rural schools to resources and communications.

A second major outcome was assisting rural teachers of Indonesian language and culture. Indonesian language teachers in rural areas can feel very isolated with few opportunities to practice the language with native speakers. Most of the AIREP students lived with local teachers' families who used their stay as an opportunity to practise the language and expand cultural knowledge. Some of the host teachers were undertaking further Indonesian study by distance education and valued the assistance that the AIREP students could give them. At least three of these host teachers have undertaken further studies of Indonesian in Yogyakarta in 1996, renewing their acquaintance with their former Indonesian guests. These continuing links between western region schools and Indonesian school teachers have great educational potential.

The seven 1994 and nine 1995 AIREP students taught, in all, in a total of 47 different schools and a number of pre-schools. Teachers commented favourably about the effect which the presence of the IKIP students had upon their classes' motivation to learn Indonesian. This was particularly the case where students visited classes that were learning Indonesian by telematics and had never met or spoken to an Indonesian person previously. Teachers of the Distance Education program funded by the Country Area Program (CAP) conducted by the ACT Catholic Education Office conveyed their appreciation to the students who had visited the classes taught by telematics.

A number of teachers commented that the lessons in dance, gamelan, Javanese self defence, cooking and singing were received enthusiastically. For example..

'Yohana taught Indonesian language and culture lessons in both infants and primary classes. At the request of the various classroom teacher Yohana was able to perform dances and teach beginners' dance classes. Yohana performed her dances on four main occasions. Firstly, in front of the senior staff from the Indonesian Consulate in Sydney, Mr Budhi Rahardjo and Mr Hadi Santoso on Parkes Public School's Indonesian Day, 11 August. Secondly, in front of the teachers of Indonesian at an Indonesian Inservice at the Lachlan Valley Educational Resource Centre in Forbes on 31 July. Thirdly, for staff and students of Holy Family Primary school in Parkes and finally, for the staff and students at Parkes Early Childhood Centre.' (LOTE teacher, Parkes Primary)

The visit contributed to community education beyond school boundaries. The media in western NSW gave the visitors extensive coverage. Items about the visit appeared frequently in school news within those papers. Items also appeared on the local news segments on local television channels and radio stations in the region.

It is difficult to predict how long the links between the IKIP students and the schools they visited will persist. Certainly the relative costs of maintaining communications are greater for the IKIP students than the Australian schools. A number of the students arranged either whole class or individual 'pen friend' arrangements with Indonesian school students and some of the students are still corresponding with teachers from their host school.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The success of AIREP raises a number of challenges. The AII has 'mainstreamed' the program so as to enable other rural universities and communities to benefit from such an exchange. While AII will fund reciprocal links between a teacher training institute in Ujung Pandang (Sulawesi) and LaTrobe (Bendigo) in 1997, CSU will be seeking new funding sources to undertake further AIREP visits in 1997/8. Cost of air-fares will be the major barrier to expanding such programs to other parts of rural Australia. Locating funding sources and ensuring that those sources do not compromise the value of the program for all participants will be the major challenge. If this is successful, it will also be important to refine the evaluation of the program. Direct feedback about the outcomes of the program for the rural students concerned will be important. No less important will be follow-up data about the impact of the rural Australian experience upon the lives and teaching practices of the AIREP students themselves..

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BIOGRAPHIES

Bob Hill & Noel Thomas teach in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University. They have both taken groups of teacher education students to undertake teaching practice in Indonesia and have evaluated the effectiveness of such overseas practicums in **Into Asia. Australian Teaching Practicums in Asia** published by Asia Education Foundation.