

## Experiencing Schooling In Another Nation: Advancing Global Awareness of Teacher Candidates

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**Abstract.** In this paper, the author argues for including international experiences—particularly the visiting of schools abroad—in teacher education programs in order to expand teacher candidates’ personal growth, expanded worldviews, and increased understanding of schooling in other countries. The paper begins by sharing a student’s reflection as an example of a transformative experience that can take place when one is immersed in the educational culture of another country. The remainder of the paper, then, showcases one innovative US school of education’s international experience where teacher candidates participated in extended visits in schools in another nation. Finally, the author asserts that it is imperative that teacher candidates be provided with opportunities and challenges to move beyond their own cultural experiences and be able to understand both the peoples and educational systems in other nations so that they may bring those understandings to bear on the education of their future students.

**Keywords:** Teacher Education; Prospective Teachers; International Experiences; Global Awareness

### **Introduction**

*Upon returning home, I have gained a more global perspective as well. I have noticed that I listen more keenly when I hear situations on the news about other countries, i.e. the attack on Israel, and simple things even my selection in movies. I am beginning to see the bigger picture in politics, education, and even at home. I guess you can say that I am beginning to think “outside the box.”* Teacher candidate

This deeply felt reflection was written by a teacher candidate who participated in a transformative international experience with a professor and 23 peers from an urban university in southern California. The goal of the experience was to positively impact the preparation of preservice teachers by developing their dispositions regarding global awareness. The project was part of a larger

initiative that seeks to influence prospective teachers' personal worldviews and appreciation for the perspective of the "other." by internationalizing the teacher education curriculum. This paper sets out the context, aims, content and scope of students' shared experiences related to visitations to primary and secondary schools in the UK.

### **Literature Review**

Educational researchers have long documented the need for teacher education programs to create a teacher force that understands and can accommodate student diversity (Horsley, & Bauer, 2010; Miller, Bennett, Carter, Hylton-Fraser, Castle, & Potter, 2015; Ryan, A. M., Heineke & Steindam, 2014). The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), has created standards for the education of teachers that includes addressing the need for understanding the many aspects of diversity. For example, NCATE's Standard 4: Diversity requires teacher education programs to ensure "*Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P-12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P-12 schools.*" (NCATE, 2008, p.12).

Visiting schools within another nation provides teacher candidates with first-hand experiences of schooling in a culture other than their own and expands their teacher preparation course work in the area of global studies. It has been documented in the literature that these international experiences result in teacher candidates' dispositional growth and expanded worldviews (Williams, 2005; Sachau, Brasher & Fee, 2010; Mahan & Stachowski, 1987). Moreover, this global dimension is considered an essential element in teacher education programs (Willard-Holt, 2001) and one that positively impacts teacher candidates' professional and personal development (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008) and cultural awareness (Osler, 1998; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003).

Those who have been charged with the education of new teachers keenly appreciate their responsibility to increase both the global understandings and multicultural pedagogical skills of teacher candidates (Paige & Goode, 2009; McCalman, 2014). The literature strongly suggests that visitations to schools in another nation augments teacher candidates' cultural learning through direct interaction with students and teachers (Mahon & Cushner, 2007; Matthews, & Lawley, 2011; Stachowski, Richardson, and Henderson, 2003).

### **Context**

The Education Department at one urban university in Southern California adopted, as one of its four strategic goals, *the development of highly effective, socially responsible, and marketable students through International Programs*. This goal was influenced by the framework of Gilliom (1993) who proposed two critical tenants for teacher education programs, (1) preservice education programs should be designed to cultivate a global perspective in students preparing to teach, and (2) teacher educators, themselves, must be committed to global education if they are to prepare globally oriented teachers effectively (p. 40). In support of this goal, the current project became dedicated to creating

international school learning experiences for teacher candidates for their discovery of new points of entry in their own global interpretations and an accompanying passion to share these with their future students. An integral factor in this project was the promotion of transformative learning, a developmental theory whereby “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

### **Transformative Experience**

Transformative learning is concerned with “how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience” (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). Central to transformative learning theory is a change that leads to the development of a new meaning structure (Moseley, Reeder, & Armstrong, 2008). Mezirow (1997) views transformative learning as the essential component of adult education, because it “helps the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purpose rather than uncritically acting on those of others” (p. 11). This was the goal of the project – to lead the teacher candidates to a newly enhanced worldview so that they, then, may assist in the education of globally competent students.

### **Description of Program**

A partnership was established between our institution and a university program in the UK to investigate how international experiences impact the beliefs and dispositions of future teachers and also may lead to a transformative experience in their lives. The program is termed “short-term” as opposed to an entire semester or year. These “short term” experiences usually extend for one to two weeks and are intended to provide an overview of the culture and the schooling in that nation. Sometimes short-term programs are criticized for being so short that it is almost like a travel tour. However, experts agree that if the class has had significant pre-class assignments and readings and post-class debriefings, then, the experience, while short, may still serve to be transformative (Cwick & Benton, 2005). If properly structured, the pre-trip course sessions have the potential of engaging students at the outset for a transformative experience. Following is an excerpt from a student’s reflective journal that showcases what can be accomplished in a pre-trip class:

*It was a long day, no one wanted to be at (the university) so late after student teaching, but we were there. It was the only time we could meet. There was pizza, which took the edge off, and catching up with friends and professors we had not seen in awhile. All of us were curious about what we would learn in England but did not know what to expect. Questions were answered about traveling logistics and housing, last minute details were hammered out and we all got t-shirts. Then the class started and we began to study international education and systems of learning in other nations. This was when the fun began. Despite the fact that we had to be at university late, I found this particular pre-overseas evening to be one of the most interesting aspects of the course. We compared and contrasted the way that the different nations had chosen to approach education as well as the history of education in those nations. I found it very interesting to learn that although Korea, Singapore, and Finland all ranked high on the international PISA test,*

*they had extremely different ways of approaching education. Knowing that makes it clear that one way is not right for every nation, so what is right for America?*

*We also discussed US education in the context of a larger world, how global education would benefit our students. There were heated debates about the positives that we saw in the education systems of other nations and why similar systems either would or would not work here in the States. This topic and discussion was the real heart of this course, to make sense of why global education is important for our future students and to see how the American system can evolve to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century demands.*

*This class will impact my future professional aspirations because it has taught me that having these types of conversations about global education are important. They are important to for me to reflect on as an educator and they are important for my students who will be the ultimate benefactors of any new ideas I can generate while learning about education in other nations. It is vital to study the educational systems of nations because we can see what works in other nations and possibly work towards improving our own system. Teacher candidate*

### **Documenting Students' Transformative Experiences**

It would be difficult to catalog the myriad of experiences and learnings from the entire group of teacher candidates. However, examination of the final student reflections revealed that they did, indeed, have a number of transformative experiences. First, however, in an effort to provide the reader with a foundation with which to better understand, these comments have been grouped into two categories, (1) insights regarding academic comparisons between schooling in our country and the host country, and, (2) perceptions that encompassed social-emotional phenomena observed in the school visits. In addressing the transformative experiences regarding academic issues, the school visits were replete with comparative "ah-ha's" from the students. In fact it was difficult for the teacher candidates *not* to compare and *not* to judge the comparisons as either "better than" or "less than" their own culture. Following are a few typical responses:

*Student 1: One thing that I saw done very effectively in the classroom in Oxford was differentiation. The schools had a very organized and effective system for differentiation that I have not seen in US schools as it changed based on the student or on the difficulty of the lesson being taught. I felt like this impacted me because we have been taught so much about differentiation in the classroom, but I have rarely seen it effectively implemented. This aspect of teaching always seems to be the hardest so observing a teacher who was effectively implementing it throughout her lessons was inspiring.*

*Student 2: The teachers in England focus on both skills and strategies. In the United States we have been learning how to implement similar competencies with the new Common Core Standards. However, I believe that in the US there is a more solid theory attached to these new conceptually driven standards. Therefore, I will be able to take the teaching strategies I observed in my second school visit back to my third grade classroom and implement them in order to help my students develop critical thinking skills while using 21<sup>st</sup> century skills!*

Student 3: *An aspect that had an impact on my experience was the hands-on inquiry based learning I saw taking place at the schools I visited. I have learned about inquiry teaching in my classes in the US but have never seen it implemented. Touching back to the outdoor education I saw taking place in the fifth grade class, the students were conducting a science experiment where they were designing a parachute. This had a positive impact on me because it demonstrates how learning can be fun and exciting for the students as well as having them engage with sound inquiry-based teaching strategies. As a future educator, I want to incorporate inquiry-learning projects where the students are in charge and have a sense of responsibility for their own learning.*

### **Social and emotional learning**

According to Cairesa, Almeidaa, & Vieirab (2012), social and emotional intelligence have become much more central in the education of teachers. They cite countless empirical studies that underscore social and emotional factors to the well-being and success of teacher candidates (Gardner 1983; Sternberg 2003, Goleman, 1995, Mayer 2000). "When becoming a teacher, these variables can acquire special importance considering the needs of the student teachers to adapt to new situations, innovate and solve problems, lead groups, and assist students," (Cairesa, S., Almeidaa, L., & Vieirab, D., 2012, p.165). Cadet teachers' transformative experiences in this area were clearly observed by the course instructors. Moreover, student reflections revealed that they encountered many more social/emotional impressions than academic ones.

Student 4: *This entire course has shown me how to incorporate activities where students learn about other nations' viewpoints and their significance. In my class, I want my students to develop an acknowledgement of others and the realization that they will work with people who might be completely different from them.*

Student 5: *In the last school visit I was impressed with the entire school and one teacher in particular. The students in the class were comprised of many different ethnic backgrounds. I asked some of the students whether or not they liked their school. Many students said that they do. In my teacher mind, I decided that I wanted to incorporate activities so that my future students could learn about other cultures' viewpoints concerning major global events. Why would teaching about other cultures be important to American students? For me, it because learning about something different means accepting change.*

Student 6: *While visiting primary schools in England, I was profoundly moved by the administrations' concern with the holistic development and enrichment of their individual students. It seemed that headmasters and teachers had close and intimate relationships with their students and designed their curriculum and school policies for the greater good of the entire student body. At one of the schools I visited, the headmaster explained how the school focuses on core values and doesn't just have students memorize these terms and concepts but encourages students to live them.*

Student 7: *This school visit also reinforced the importance of building trusting relationships with families and how important it is for at risk students. This school had its own café on campus. It is meant to be a neutral place where teachers can meet with families in a casual non-threatening or non-intimidating environment. The headmaster*

*said the most difficult children to reach were those of white, working class families who have lost trust in the school system. The café is a place where they can begin to build relationships and promote trust.*

### **Implications For Teacher Education**

If we consider again the tenants of transformative learning, we must take into account that not all individuals will be able to engage in a transformative experience (Taylor, 1998). However, if transformative learning is the goal of these international experiences, then, how may it best be fostered? As Taylor (1998) states, “the teacher’s role in establishing an environment that builds trust and care and facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners is a fundamental principle of fostering transformative learning” (p.2). From the very beginning of the international course the two instructors attempted to establish a trusting environment and one that might alter preconceived perceptions of the superiority of the US educational system. The pre-trip course session allowed for participants to express fears and concerns in a nonthreatening environment, as well as to get to know the faculty prior to departure. The faculty instructors also corresponded with participants who had concerns and questions about traveling to a foreign country. In addition, the instructors traveled with the participants, assisting them with accommodations, public transportation, and school visitations. The project also included several cultural excursions with the faculty team into the country, allowing students – with faculty support – to begin to experience the culture, people, and land that were new to them. This adventure also allowed for intensive, informal conversations among the students and faculty in close quarters. In these discussions, the participants shared what they had learned, expressed their concerns and fears, asked questions and solicited advice from the faculty. In addition, these sessions became excellent opportunities for the faculty to share what this cross-cultural experience meant to them and what they were also learning.

The literature has made it clear that teacher candidates need to be able to instill in their future students understandings regarding different peoples and cultures from around the world. To accomplish this goal teacher education programs must craft opportunities for students to learn about others from a less ethnocentric mind set. Moreover, preservice teachers need experiences that cause them to develop their dispositions regarding global awareness and the complexities of the world around them. Visiting schools in international settings allows them to seek and to have direct experiences regarding different philosophies of education as revealed in schooling and teaching practices in other nations’ educational systems.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has set forth an argument for including global experiences in teacher education programs. The overall goal was for teacher candidates in an international course to fully understand educational practices in another nation as well as to rethink their own biases, which hopefully led them to assimilate transformative perspectives grounded in “a more fully developed frame of

reference, one that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 13). If we, in teacher education, commit to having teacher candidates learn, firsthand, about other cultures and their educational systems it will most likely lead to improved classroom practices and flexibility. This commitment supports Mezirow’s belief that transformative learning must not only consist of the experience itself, but also opportunities for critical reflection and rational discourse with others. As Moseley, Reeder, & Armstrong (2008) assert, “The changing world as reflected in the diversity of students arriving daily in our classrooms constitutes an increasingly significant aspect of the teaching and learning environment in American public schools.” (p. 69.) Therefore, it is imperative that teacher candidates be provided with opportunities and challenges to move beyond their own cultural experiences. This last reflection attests to the cultural and life lessons that can be learned by students and the connections they can make in order for the experiences to come alive and be long remembered.

*Finally, the whole experience left me with a hunger for more. I think it would be amazing to be able to collaborate with teachers all over the world. In addition to providing my students with 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills, I am going to find different ways to reach out across the world to provide meaningful content on global awareness in my classroom. It is going to be fun!* Teacher Candidate

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