

## **Aspiring Teachers' Cross-Cultural Encounters: Spaces for Developing Global Awareness**

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**Abstract:** *Teacher preparation programmes around the world continue to be challenged to produce well-rounded and skilled teachers with diverse perspectives to issues and a global worldview especially in this era of migration. Teachers need to come into classrooms with the capability of implementing multi-disciplinary and contextual curricular for the benefit of all students regardless of where the accident of birth places them. This paper argues for broadening aspiring teachers' knowledge base by inculcating diverse paradigms into teacher education curricular in this era of cross-continental migrations and technological explosions. While multiculturalism seem to be on its way out of the educational discourse, there continues to be a need to sensitize aspiring teachers and constantly re-evaluate curricular content and personal perspectives that influence classroom practices. The study focuses on aspiring teachers' reaction to cross-cultural curricular content for the purpose of teacher education programme development, policy and attitudinal change among teachers for the benefit of inclusive learning and further research on the production of globally minded teachers.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Researchers in the area of education continue to identify factors that necessitate the broadening of paradigms in the teacher education curricular. The factors include the notion that students who come to teacher education programmes bring with them deeply entrenched beliefs about teaching and learning, values and are sometimes resistant to current notions of cross-cultural education. They sometimes lack diverse perspectives on issues of cultural differences. The challenge is further complicated by a lack of consensus about the most efficient approach in addressing these factors.

In spite of the current global realities of religious hate and never-ending wars, the world is more diverse and multiculturally integrated than at any other time. This is due to large scale migration and immigration around the world. When average teachers who were born, raised and educated in one context suddenly find themselves face-to-face with students who are born and raised in a different cultural context they are unprepared and ill-equipped to connect and work successfully with such students. This experiential and arguably socio-cultural and socio-economic dichotomy between these teachers and their students has far-reaching consequences for the students. Research literature in teacher education programmes suggests that unless teacher educators raise the content of their curricular to global standards, student teachers will continue to be ill-prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom.

The multiculturalism debate has come a long way as colleges, universities and even countries continue to respond to the changing demographics by modifying policies and educational programmes. Some governments like the United States have issued policy statements (NCLB, Race to the Top) calling for education and curricular reform and complete programme overhaul. These calls include the need to embrace the diversity that demographic shifts bring and to begin to address ways to form partnerships within this new dynamic of diversity otherwise known as cross-culturalism. Kirkwood (2001) reminds us that we live in an increasingly interdependent and rapidly changing world. Ruth Van Reken and Sally Rushmore (2009) add that global awareness and intercultural competence are "must have" qualities for global job markets. With the increasing interaction among peoples of the world, skills in cross-cultural communication, intercultural competence, and the need for knowledge and understanding of people from other cultures have become critical to survival (Merryfield, 1996, as quoted in Van Reken & Rushmore, 2009, p. 60).

#### *Statement of Purpose and Research Question*

This study investigates how aspiring teachers' cultural perspectives are influenced by participating in or encountering cross-cultural learning. Specifically, I focused on any new, broad-based cross-cultural and or global awareness that they may develop as a direct result of interacting with different cultural experiences. I also examined the implications of my findings on contributions to existing literature, teacher education programme

designers and policy makers on developing more effective and efficient globalized teacher education programmes.

Coming from the backdrop of multiple multicultural studies, as a researcher I am aware of the possibility of the intrusion of my personal assumptions, preconceptions, and biases into this study. I guarded against these intrusions by focusing on the overarching question of the study: *How do aspiring teachers respond to curricular content that is culturally different from theirs?* In line with phenomenological principles of personalized experience (Polkinghorn, 1998), I used the following sub-question to guide the field work: What are the learning outcomes of aspiring teachers' encounter with cross-cultural learning experiences and curricular content?

### ***Rationale for the Study***

Our world has become inescapably multicultural; therefore, our social systems—for example, schools—face the challenge of adapting to the changes that accompany the new cultural dynamic. Available literature on teacher education indicates that teacher educators need to provide aspiring teachers opportunities to reflect on their learning and to self-address the cultural, linguistic, racial and ethnic differences that may exist between them and their prospective students (Gay, 1994). The multiple dichotomies between teachers and their students have consequences for students' academic achievement (Cochran-Smith, 2008; Ogbu, 1999). Additionally, the global job market requires all applicants to possess not only intelligence but cross-cultural cooperation skills for working with people from different national and cultural backgrounds (Nussbaum, 1997). If teachers do not possess these skills themselves, they cannot be expected to impart them to their students. Therefore, while the teacher education academy has emphasized multiculturalism for the last three decades, “innovative programmes are needed to enable ...students to acquire global competency as part of their undergraduate curricula” (Allert, Atkinson, Groll, & Hirleman, 2007, p. 1).

### ***Method***

Using a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I explored, defined, described and interpreted participants' experiences and interaction with cross-cultural curricula content (Feldman, 1998), being vigilant for any emerging new perspectives among participants. My study of aspiring teachers' experiences with unfamiliar different cultural curricula content fits with the philosophy, strategies and intentions of hermeneutics, sometimes referred to as interpretive research paradigm. Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) define it as follows: “The interpretive research paradigm encompasses a number of research approaches, which have a central goal of seeking to interpret the social world” (p. 613). It makes clear the notion that meanings are constructed by human beings in unique ways, depending on their context and personal frames of reference as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). I believe that it is the most suitable for my study because of its potential to generate new understandings of this phenomenon being explored from multiple (participants') dimensions. Particularly, since I am seeking preservice teachers' reaction that is embedded in the real-world experience of development of new worldviews within the interpretive paradigm.

### ***Participants***

This study was conducted as part of a semester long general faculty course taught by the researcher. The course had a student enrollment of 375 students; with 72% female and 28% male. Of the actual 38 participants, 68% were female and 32% were male. The selection was based on their official enrollment in the course, willingness to cooperate in the research by sharing personal encounters with other cultures and granting permission for their quiz scores to be used for the study.

### ***Data collection***

Data was collected using multiple methods. The data collection included use of (a) a questionnaire, (b) whole class discussion (c) an end of semester quiz. The paper/pencil questionnaire was the primary source of data collection because of the in-efficient electronic system and poor power supply in the study area. The questionnaire was also a more reliable tool due to its accessibility and ease of use for the participants. Its convenience of use enabled the researcher to assess participants' personal knowledge of basic global issues such as human rights, while the whole class discussions served to elicit underlying beliefs and interpretations of their cultural experiences. The quiz assessed any changes in cultural perspectives and interpretations that may have resulted from their encounter with different curricular content.

### ***Literature review***

The literature review for this study presents a brief history of the origins of cross-cultural [Study abroad] programmes, some institutional and personal missions of some teacher education cross-cultural programmes.

The review also summarizes the study abroad debate noting some of its criticisms and concluding with its benefits for cultural awareness.

### ***Brief history of study abroad***

The concept of study abroad can be traced back to 1923 when Professor Raymond W. Kirkbride (ND) in the department of Modern Languages at the University of Delaware, United States conceptualized the idea of sending his American students abroad for their junior year (University of Delaware, ND). As a WWI veteran, Professor Kirkbride had experienced firsthand the consequences of national disagreements, but he had come to appreciate “the potential that travel and study abroad had for promoting cross-cultural understanding” (ND). According to the University of Delaware Institute for Global Studies website, a lesser president might have thrown the upstart Kirkbride out of his office because study abroad was unheard of, and America's isolationist tendencies were still strong, so soon after the war. But then the University of Delaware President Hullihen recognized that the Delaware Foreign Study Plan (which came to be known as the Junior Year Abroad) had far-reaching influence. It would, as Hullihen saw it, produce better-rounded students, train future foreign language teachers, and provide experience for students who wanted to go into careers with international aspects (p. 1).

In spite of the University of Delaware's refusal to fund the program, Professor Kirkbride's resourcefulness led to a “July 7, 1923 sail of eight students aboard the *Rochambeau* to France”; this was “America's first study abroad program” (p. 1). This first Junior Year Abroad lasted six weeks and was a success. The University continued to send student groups to France and, later, to Switzerland and Germany. Students from other colleges and universities—including Columbia, Pennsylvania, Wellesley, Wesleyan, Brown, Smith, Harvard and Princeton—participated in the programme, and between 1923 and 1948, 902 students spent their junior year abroad through the University of Delaware programme (University of Delaware, p.1). McKay and Montgomery (1995) reported that “the notion of providing opportunities for students to gain experiences abroad did not greatly influence preservice teacher education until the 1980s” (p. 6), at a time when teacher education reform efforts started to include multicultural and global perspectives in the teacher preparation curricular (Heydl & McCarthy, 2003).

In line with this heightened interest, Hahn (1984) had documented earlier efforts by the U.S. National Council for the Social Studies which revised its curriculum guidelines to state that the purpose of social studies education is “to prepare students to be rational, humane, participating citizens in a world that is increasingly interdependent (P. 297).” The phrase “global citizenship” was introduced to the discourse when Hahn (1984), who was then the National Council for Social Studies President, placed it on the organization's agenda, stating that:

Just as the spread of nationalism since the eighteenth century caused people to rethink the meaning of citizen, so now it is once again time to rethink that concept in light of our global interdependence. Like it or not, each of us riding on this planet though most of us do not realize it, we are participants in a global society. (p. 297)

With continuing developments in economic globalization came increased calls to internationalize education with a focus on producing citizens for the competitive global market. This call for internationalization accelerated the idea of cross-cultural education in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of profound social change that forced a re-examination of global cultural heritage. Educators began to acknowledge multicultural education in its many forms as a part of the educational needs of all nations which were no longer monocultural but have become amalgamations of many cultures (Hanley, 1999).

Burnapp (2007), like many others, notes that preservice teachers who participate in study abroad programmes develop cross cultural empathy and a willingness to build personal relationships with people from other cultures. Along the same lines, Phillion, Malewski, Sharma and Wang (2009) found that preservice teachers who participate in a cross-cultural programme tend to develop increased cultural sensitivity and that participation widens world views in culturally disconnected and resistant students; all of these are considered important elements in working with culturally diverse groups of students. Cultural sensitivity is a fundamental component in teacher education because teachers have the privileged opportunity in their interaction with young students to demonstrate genuine recognition and respect for who the students are, their cultural and ethnic values, thereby taking advantage of the richness embedded in classroom diversity. This gives teacher education programmes a holistic dimension, simultaneously adding to and enriching the discourse on multiculturalism and globalizing teacher education (Mahon and Stachowski, 1990). Adding to the discourse, Cordeiro (2007) argue that by preparing teachers to teach tolerance from an inclusive global education perspective, they “help students to negotiate the borderlands towards a more respectful and tolerant acceptance of those who are different from themselves” (, p. 152).

Other researchers also found that new teachers who have participated in any form of foreign learning experience demonstrate a broader understanding of their teacher role in the classroom by demonstrating a heightened ability to interact with and teach diverse students (Mahon & Cushner, 2002). According to Wilson

(1993), “an internationally experienced person can gain a global perspective including substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding; and international experiences often lead to personal growth and new international relationships” (p. 21).

Consequently, the concept of study abroad has been tied to other concepts like globalization, global citizenship, or cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 2007; Joshua, 1996; Linklater, 1999). Advocates for all of these concepts in addition to multiculturalism, cross- and inter-culturalism all agree that exposing learners to study abroad programmes or culturally infused curricula contents can broaden and deepen their understanding and outlook of the world. And “professional associations, allied organizations and educational studies specialists, the United States began to show interest in designing programs seeking to inspire young people to become global citizens” (Lewin 2005, p. 5).

Many scholars (Appiah, 2006; Brustein, 2007; Cushner 1998; Joshua, 1996; Lewin, 2009; Linklater, 1999; Phillion et al, 2009) focused on the role of study abroad as one of the many approaches used by colleges and universities to provide multicultural experiences for their students and internationalize teacher education programmes. Cushner (1998), in his review of progress made so far at multi-culturalizing teacher education, posed the following questions:

What changes are evident in people’s thinking, their attitudes, and their behaviour as a result of an international experience? How are preservice teachers who participate in an international experience different from those who do not? What occurs during the experience that accounts for these changes? And, how might others achieve a similar benefit? (p. 5)

These questions underscore and deepen the debate on internationalizing teacher education programmes amid current human movements. Exploring some institutional missions and aspiring teachers’ personal goals for participating in international cross-cultural programmes may provide an important insight into how students interpret those experiences.

#### ***Institutional and personal missions and goals of study abroad programmes***

My literature review showed that teacher education institutions use study abroad for the primary goal of exposing preservice teachers to other cultural and ethnic groups, improving their understanding about themselves, the world at large, and their chosen area of study. The review also showed that aspiring teachers come to cross-cultural programmes with personal goals as well, which may include social justice, language acquisition, and cultural integration.

The 2007 Open Doors review of the study abroad mission statements of 40 leading colleges and universities in the U.S. showed that 75% of them included some element of preparing graduates whose thinking transcends their primary cultural, linguistic and racial heritage to include seeing the world through other cultural perspectives. They reported that some mission statements stated that teacher education, through their study abroad programs, aim to cultivate a philosophy that enables teachers to move easily among different cultures, to give the benefit of the doubt to diverse ways of thinking, to go beyond applying their own labels and categories to practices that seem strange, and to seek out the common humanity in those whose beliefs and practices are different. This is where I see great potential for study.

Approaching teacher education from a global worldview is not without its challenges. For instance, Noddings (2005) raised fundamental questions that challenged international programmes such as study abroad or other cross-cultural programmes to explore the creation of cosmopolitan spaces that Appiah (2006) advocates. Noddings’ (2005) asks:

Is it possible for a teacher to meaningfully preserve and include the different life experiences that students bring to classrooms? If not, which do we [teachers] want to eliminate, and when we [teachers] have eliminated the *undesirable* differences, on what basis will we [teachers] argue for diversity? (p. 13)

While the answers to these questions are rhetorical, they require on-going studies and exploration.

#### ***Study Abroad as a component of teacher education programmes***

In her call for diversifying learning spaces Noddings (2005) asks: “Should we [teachers] sanction cultural practices that to us clearly dehumanize women? If not, how do we dialogue about this issue respectfully across cultures?” (p. 13). Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism provides a good answer to this question. According to Appiah (2006), cosmopolitanism advocates extending equitable status to all cultural, ethnic and religious groups without promoting any specific values as central (p. xv). In order to address these questions, preservice teachers need to be guided and supported as they navigate the dissonance created by their cross-cultural experiences. By overcoming this dissonance, new knowledge is created—the kind of knowledge that is at the core of the mission of international cross-cultural programmes and the kind that is needed by classroom teachers across the globe.

Supporting the argument for the internationalization of teacher education programmes, Hansen (2010) notes that intercultural understanding implies more than tolerance of differences. He argues that rather, intercultural understanding requires a willingness to learn from *Others*, or with *Others*, whose cultural and ethnic traditions and inheritances are different from ours. He adds that it means regarding those differences as indices rather than as departures between groups. In consonance with Appiah's (2007) notion of creating shared spaces for mutual co-existence among different cultural and ethnic groups, educational scholars need to focus on how education can equip people, and teachers in particular, to negotiate justly and peacefully cultural, religious, ethnic, and other differences (Costa, 2005; Gregoriou, 2004; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Feinberg, 2003; Papastephanou, 2002.; Saito, 2008; Snauwaert, 2009; Todd, 2008). Research shows that broad-based inclusive curricula create:

Critical openness to the new (the *Other*) and critical loyalty to the known (the *Self*)... [where] preset and familiar frames of interpretation and understanding would be juxtaposed with alternative frames that shed new light on the questions, problems, and issues at hand. (Hansen, 2010, p. 97)

Comprehensive, culturally responsive curricular have the potential to guide preservice teachers to make meaning in their own lives while developing a broader more critical worldview. This journey should reflect who they are as individuals and as part of the human race.

### ***The study abroad programme debate***

Current rapidly changing demographic shifts necessitated by socio political/economic and religious strife has reinvigorated the need for reform of teacher education programmes. While some believe that an overhaul of the curricular to include international learning experiences will facilitate the production of preservice teachers who possess the cultural awareness and other competencies required to teach diverse student populations, others argue that an expanded worldview can be achieved using culturally enriched curricular programmes. They point out that it can be done by placing preservice teachers in schools and communities that expose them to different cultural groups through cross-cultural experiential learning.

Though many studies have attested to the positive impact of study abroad programme on preservice teachers (Burnapp, 2007; Landorf, Rocco, and Nevin, 2007; Lewin, 2009; Lucas, 2006; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma & Wang, 2009), study abroad is not without its opponents. For example, while many acknowledge the substantive knowledge gain and reflective self-development that study abroad brings, they also argue that much more needs to be done (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). These critics note that study abroad may have to overcome challenges such as scheduling the program during the regular school year so that rather than having visiting students room with each other, they can be housed with local students to increase opportunities for visiting students to interact with local students, thereby increasing their foreign language skills. These critics remind study abroad programme organizers of the need to double efforts in providing incentive for students from different programs to participate in the same study abroad, allowing for more interaction amongst the visiting students themselves. They also challenge institutions to incentivize students from low socio-economic backgrounds to participate in study abroad by providing grants and scholarships for such students.

Other critics note that with global and demographic mobility shifting the focus from political, scientific, and economic competition to global citizenship, cooperation, collaboration, and diplomacy for equity, justice and fairness, study abroad organizers need to shift perception from the parochial and self-centric perspective to the global worldview.

Despite the criticism of study abroad programmes, scholars (Cushner, 2007; Cooper, 2007; Malewski & Phillion, 2009) overwhelmingly recommend infusing teacher education programmes with cross-cultural content. Wilson (1993) sums it up thus: gaining a global perspective, including "substantive knowledge" and "perceptual understanding" and developing self and relationships including "personal growth" and "interpersonal connections" are key outcomes for participants of international experiences (p. 16).

## **II. Discussion And Results**

The findings from this study is in line with available literature which continues to show that intercultural experiences initiate awareness in culturally disconnected and resistant students on the one hand and increase cultural sensitivity and widen worldview in others (Aglazor, 2011; Cooper, 2007; Cushner, 2007; Malewski & Phillion, 2009).

The data from each student was analyzed by coding the responses to the questionnaire identifying key words and phrases. These words and phrases were matched with those identified from the whole group discussion which then led to the development of horizontal themes among participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Identified themes were systematically compared extracting key themes common to the group. During these phases of analysis, the content were examined and discussed between the researcher and the participants thus safeguarding against the potential misinterpretation of the data. The dominant theme that emerged supports

existing literature which encourages exposing preservice teachers to cross- and inter-cultural experiences to better position them for effective interacting with all students in their classrooms.

In the small group discussions, 62% of the 28 students who consistently participated in the discussion admitted that participating in the study broadened their horizon and enabled them understand other cultures from new perspectives. Sixty percent noted that this study discussion sessions were the first time they were participating in a formal, constructive exchange on cultural issues. One of the students had this to say "Usually, any time we talk about culture, we are always shouting at each other and pointing out what is bad about the other culture and how our culture is better than the other" (Aglazor, field notes, 2016). This reiterates findings from prior research that preservice teachers who participate in cross-cultural or study abroad programmes reduce their ethnocentrism. This study also proves that most cross-cultural experiences and study abroad programmes seem to promote these benefits regardless of programme focus, length and structure. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### ***Implication for programme designers and policy makers***

Building on previous work in this area, these findings make it incumbent on the education systems to design cross-cultural programmes to enable aspiring teachers acquire more self-awareness and deeper understanding of the world at large. The self-awareness of one's own identity rooted in values, beliefs and culture serves as the bedrock on which one builds other experiences and perceives the world. It further allows oneself to understand complex issues from multiple vantage points, recognizing sources of global interdependence and a shared fate that implicates humanity and all life on the planet. It also expands ones vision to look beyond distinctions, at least in one's mind, between insiders and outsiders in order to view the human experience in more universal terms (Lewin, 2009).

Similarly, policy makers must begin to acknowledge the ever pressing presence of global changes necessitated by migration and make or review policies to address these changes. Such policies would include funding for teacher training programme expansion, opportunities for international study experiences and inter-continental professional development requirements for teacher educators.

### **III. Conclusion**

With the growing popularity of making multicultural experiences part of teacher education programmes and the recognized influence that beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions have on teacher-student dynamics and the consequent effect on student academic achievement and sense of self, there is an added impetus for a deeper understanding of preservice teachers' perceptions of themselves and of others from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

And, as long as programme missions and goals emphasize cross or multicultural understanding and acceptance over the deeper monumental problems that humanity faces, cross-cultural programme participants will not see the world as the context and the fundamental referent for human lives. While these structural positioning of outcomes of cross-cultural programmes show its promise in mitigating the single perspective that aspiring teachers bring to teacher education programmes and classrooms, it also justifies further in-depth investigation that focuses specifically on the interpretation of their encounters with other cultural experiences. There is need for continued studies to clearly articulate the benefits of exposing aspiring teachers to cross-cultural experiences during their training. It is believed that such exposure would inform their beliefs, assumptions and perspectives about working with children from other cultures. It is hoped that the change in assumptions and perspectives is enough to create the kind of student-teacher relationships that have been proven to increase students' academic performance.

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