

**Teaching and learning across borders: Teacher candidates and teacher educators
explore international experiences**

Lynn Bayne

Angela Ward

Julia DeGirolamo

Sherri Ross

Shelagh Bangsund

Lacey Eninew

University of Saskatchewan

Introduction

Each year for the last 24 years, a small number of teacher candidates from the University of Saskatchewan has participated in international internships. These experiences have usually been personally and professionally rewarding for the individuals who have undertaken them, as evidenced in the teacher candidates' enthusiastic descriptions of cross-cultural experiences and encounters with new ways of 'doing school'. In this paper we provide a practical and theoretical framework for our teacher candidates' international internships, hear their stories of personal, professional and pedagogical development, and explore issues and challenges.

Theoretical background to the international experience

In their work on the development of pre-service teachers, Ritchie and Wilson (2000) consider apprenticeships to be *accidental* or *deliberate*. Future teachers have experienced a long "accidental apprenticeship" into teaching through observing their own teachers for thousands of hours and through informal exposure to cultural ideas about schools and teachers through family experiences and various media. Deliberate apprenticeship to teaching comes through formal instruction in colleges of education. Teacher candidates' professional identities are formed through the extended 'accidental' apprenticeships of their own schooling (Rogoff, 1990), through their deliberate apprenticeships (courses and field experiences) in education programs, and also through acculturation in a particular socio-cultural milieu. Teaching and learning across borders, whether cultural or geographical, may

enable teacher candidates to broaden their professional understandings through participating in diverse communities of practice.

Context of the international internship at the University of Saskatchewan

The University of Saskatchewan has had agreements with the Student Teaching Abroad (STA) of Moorhead State University since 1974, with Global Student Teaching (GST) of the University of Minnesota at Morris since 1996. We have had an exchange agreement with Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia since 1995, and had an exchange of interns as well as faculty with Precarpathian University in Ukraine in the late 1990's. The STA program, which placed teacher candidates primarily in Asia, Europe and Mexico, Central and South America, is on hiatus. The GST program began with a focus on Australia, New Zealand and Asia but has since expanded into Africa, Europe and South America. Teacher candidates in these programs were placed in international schools where English is the language of instruction, or in national schools in English speaking countries. The exchange agreement with Curtin University brought students from Perth to Saskatoon for teaching internships and for courses in education and other disciplines. The numbers of University of Saskatchewan teacher candidates who are involved in international internships varied from year to year, but averaged about 5% of the total teacher candidates placed in a given year.

Locations of international internships reflected teacher candidates' choices, as well as the availability of secure and appropriate placements. Individual choices were made based on teacher candidates' previous travel experiences, academic interests, family heritage, recommendations of friends or others. Overall, choices in more recent years have included less ethnocentric choices and a stronger, more deliberate desire to seek truly cross cultural teaching and learning experiences.

International stories

We share stories of recent international experiences in our own words, reflecting the anxieties and excitements of teaching across borders.

Julia

I completed my internship in Geelong Australia, at Sacred Heart, an all girls private secondary school. In my four months there I taught in the areas of home economics and religious education.

Since a trip to Europe in high school I have had the overwhelming desire to travel. For a number of years I had considered going overseas to teach English, but then I heard about a family friend who had completed her internship abroad, from that point on I had my heart set on doing an international internship. I not only wanted the chance to travel, but I also wanted to challenge myself personally and professionally. What I didn't want was to lose sight of the purpose of the internship, which was to get valuable teaching experience. This is why I chose Australia. The process of getting there was by no means easy, so that prior to leaving my stress level was at an all time high. But the day finally arrived, my bags were packed and I was saying goodbye to my family. I was setting on a journey nearly two years in the making, and there was no turning back.

Personally

The best way I can summarize this whole experience is to compare it to a roller coaster ride. There were so many highs, but there were also some lows. I signed up knowing that it wouldn't all be peaches and cream. Through the process I became very aware of my strengths, I discovered that I am actually a good teacher. I had developed a good relationship with my students and was getting positive feedback from my cooperating teachers. I also discovered that I could be flexible. Now I am confident that I could be successful anywhere in the world.

I also became very aware of my weaknesses, realizing that it was difficult for me to ask for help or depend on someone else. I am the sort of person who is stubborn and wants to do it all on my own. At home I would consider myself to be an extrovert, but when in a situation where I knew no-one I became very introverted. I found myself halfway across the world, alone with no friends, I couldn't even find a regular Canadian style cup of coffee, I had no choice but to adapt... and I did. There weren't a whole lot of overwhelming cultural barriers, aside from the accent and obvious vocabulary differences. It took me a good week to figure out that the word 'tea' refers to dinner, and that garbage is 'rubbish'.. With time these barriers became virtually unnoticeable, I had to

really listen to hear the accent and I was starting to picking up on slang such as ‘No worries mate’. My host mom said to me “You know Julia, that only means one thing ... Australia is becoming home”. My initial reaction was “Noooo! Canada is my home! Yes, Canada is where my family is, but home is anywhere you make it. After being back in Canada for nearly two months, I am beginning to be homesick for Australia!

Professionally

On my first day I walked into the school’s main office praying they knew I was coming. Communication had been limited to say the least. They told me I would be teaching foods and religion, but other than that I felt completely unprepared. I was really jumping head first into the deep end, but to my surprise I realized that I could swim. Teaching at Sacred Heart turned out to be a dream, from the students to the teachers to the facilities I could not have asked for better. The struggles I had teaching were struggles I would have encountered in Canada. I have come to realize that this experience was not just important for me but also for my students, those at Sacred Heart and the students I will teach in the future. Bringing a global approach to my teaching in this multicultural country of Canada will be so valuable.

Pedagogically

I now have a well rounded understanding of curriculum and instruction. I had the opportunity to work very closely with the International Baccalaureate curriculum. I had never heard of it before. It is not an easy program to use. There are very high expectations, I went from reading it one day to teaching it the next. Although its limitations were frustrating at times I now have the unique ability and skill to put the best parts of both IB and the Saskatchewan Curricula together to create a great program for my own classroom. I learned that the way our education system here in Canada works is not the only way and that as teachers we need to be open to new ideas.

With any experience there may be downsides. I didn’t get the chance to teach here in Saskatchewan, building a network of support. I don’t get to go back and visit my students, whom I miss very much. Living as a paying guest in someone else’s home for such an extended period of time was harder than I ever could have imagined. But all the

positives outweigh the negatives. I encourage all teacher candidates to teach overseas at some point in your career.

Shelagh

I found out about the international internship program when I was checking online to see if I could intern closer to home in Southern Saskatchewan. I was surprised to find out that I could intern anywhere in the world! I chose New Zealand because I've heard such beautiful things about it, and I was not disappointed. I was placed in a small rural elementary school and lived with a family on a farm. The school was completely different than any that I have seen. Each classroom was in a self-contained building. Physical education took place outside and there was a swimming pool, because learning to swim is so important when you live on a peninsula! Even though the physical setup of the school was very different, when I was in the classroom I forgot that I was in a different country. I was definitely learning continuously during this experience. It was hard to pinpoint all of the things that I learned in New Zealand because I simply just picked up what was needed to survive and succeed. If I had remained in Saskatchewan for my internship, I would have stayed in my comfort zone and wouldn't have needed to change and learn nearly as much.

My internship in New Zealand changed me personally first by showing me the value and reward of risk-taking. I was definitely what you would call a "scaredy-cat" before my trip, but after the initial overwhelming fear of being alone in a new country, I had an amazing experience. I can always look back on the risks that I took; this gives me courage! When I have my own classroom I will not be afraid to try new things and take risks knowing full well that I may not succeed, because my students and I will learn so much from the mistakes and from the triumphs. So, at the beginning of the trip, I was a bit of a chicken and by the end of the trip I decided to go skydiving!

I have developed professionally in terms of being flexible and adaptable in numerous ways. I first had to quickly adapt to a new country, a new culture, and a new home. I was in a unique situation as I had the opportunity to teach in three different classrooms - this required me to be even more flexible. This flexibility and adaptability will be invaluable to me throughout my career. I also found that when alone in a new

country, it was absolutely imperative to ask for help. Before the trip I was always stubbornly trying to remain independent at all costs. However, being able to ask for help when needed is an essential skill for a new teacher. Collaboration with other teachers will be necessary in my first years of teaching.

The most obvious way that I improved pedagogically was through seeing a different curriculum in action. For example, in New Zealand schools, teachers make it a priority to use physical activity between subjects to keep the students engaged and healthy. I also found that teachers emphasized learning about the New Zealand native bush and its importance to the country. I did not have any background knowledge on this topic, of course, and therefore needed to do some research as well as listen to the students when they had information new to me. I found that the students really enjoyed teaching me about what they knew. I need to remember that I can't always be the "expert" in every situation and so must take time to listen to what students can teach me in my own classroom. Students learn so much by teaching others; this can boost self-confidence as well. As the students became my colleagues the sense of community in our classroom grew as we learned together.

I also was able to observe the incorporation of Maori culture into the curriculum. Maori language is the official second language of New Zealand and is taught and displayed throughout the school. All teachers made a point of choosing Maori literature to read aloud and made books available for the students to read themselves. The incorporation of indigenous cultures is less obvious in Saskatchewan classrooms, even though it is part of the curriculum. It was good to see that the incorporation of Maori language and culture works smoothly into the New Zealand school day. I can see how to apply this easily to Aboriginal culture and all other cultures in my own classroom.

Sherri

I had wanted to do an international internship because I hadn't previously traveled outside of Canada, and decided that this was a good opportunity. I also have a very strong belief that in order to be an effective music teacher (or teacher of any sort), one must work to create a well-rounded repertoire of methods, resources, and personal experiences. This internship supported that belief.

I taught music at Birralee International School in the heart of downtown Trondheim, Norway. Because it was an international school I wasn't the only "outsider" there, and on top of having to adapt to the Norwegian culture to live, I had to adapt to multiple other cultures to teach.

How did it help me grow pedagogically?

At Birralee the focus in the music program is primarily on singing and performance. I had virtually no experience with singing when I first walked into the school. In fact, all of my experience with music lay in using instruments – concert band, Orff instruments, and small ensembles. Suddenly I found myself having to plan and choreograph bi-weekly performances for parents and staff, belting out songs at the top of my horribly out-of-tune voice, not only in English but in Norwegian as well, and just stepping up to the challenge. Before having gone to Norway my music program would have consisted of ensembles, listening, movement, and very minimal singing with only mandatory performances. Now, I have the tools, and the confidence, to use singing and performance to make the most of music along with everything else. Not only that, but now I also have the confidence to make mistakes – and more importantly to learn from my mistakes.

In the more practical, "behind the scenes" aspects of teaching, I was also a major participant. I collaborated with my cooperating teacher as we developed a new music program from scratch, because she was new to the school and had been left with no materials to work with. I worked on two Christmas concerts, two Christmas plays, and a Christmas variety show with other staff members, and also instigated an extra-curricular activity. I had to advocate and lobby the administration for funding for this activity (which I was granted). I know I have the passion to support an interest in music and I have some of the tools necessary to accomplish this through extra-curricular activities.

How did it help me grow professionally?

This experience has been such a wonderful eye-opener for me in terms of teaching methods, classroom experiences, understanding the role of a school, and the importance of a positive school setting in the community. I arrived believing that there would be large differences in terms of the culture and the way people acted, because

Norway is such a different country; however I did not expect the divergences from my Canadian beliefs about teaching. My colleagues had a more holistic teaching style based upon building the character of the students and engaging the learner, and less on achieving all of the goals and objectives of the curriculum. They also included a strong sense of “team” and camaraderie amongst *all* staff members that created an amazing work atmosphere. Teaching was not considered to be just a job.

One of my biggest realizations from my internship is that teaching is a life choice rather than just a profession. Education is something that shapes our lives, because once we become teachers we cannot be just a regular “Joe” or “Jane” in public; we are always representing our schools, our communities, and our beliefs.

Education for students is a privilege, and it should be an exciting and ever-changing adventure, not just a mandatory requirement that they attempt to get through and finished as fast as possible. It is not *just* facts and figures, concepts and objectives, or assessment and evaluation – it is also life experiences, interacting with people, group work, team work and emotions. Education is dynamic - never boring or “just a job.”

How did it help me grow personally?

This program offered such invaluable opportunities for individuals to grow personally and professionally. I cannot believe how much I myself have changed. I went to Norway being excited about the experience, but also anxious and apprehensive about adapting to an entirely different lifestyle, being completely on my own and learning through experience without the support of my family and friends.

When I came home and when I walked into my old room – the one that I missed and that I was so looking forward to seeing again – I realized that it is certainly an aspect of my past now. The first thing I did was purge my room of all of the things I had held onto for years and years. These objects had held some importance to me at one point, but do not anymore because what is important to me has changed. The items I have been removing now seem insignificant, and show what a cloistered life I led! What is important to me now affects my life and the life of those who are close to me in profound ways.

Now, I find myself looking more towards the big picture, and long-term, rather than how only I will be affected and short-term. I think the biggest change that I find the greatest as well is that I am simply more comfortable with myself. I am happy with who I am and with what I have done; I am independent and I know I am strong, and although it is good to have people who love me around me, I do not always *need* that to survive, whereas I once thought I did. I am no longer confined to one way of thinking, observing, comprehending or teaching. I am more open-minded, adaptable and dynamic, which is perfect for education and I think will make me a far better teacher than I would have been had I simply stayed in Saskatchewan. My experience doesn't replace my Saskatchewan or Canadian teaching experiences – it only embellishes and supports them.

Lacey

Lacey, a teacher candidate within the Indian Teacher Education Program in our college, echoed the experiences of other international interns in her feelings of being pulled out of her comfort zone in many ways. Being a first-time teacher in New Zealand, leaving her home country and living with strangers all contributed to this. Her Aboriginal ancestry gave her a strong link to the Maori children who were in her school. Most of the students she taught were from white, middle class families, although she did have contact with the Maori bilingual program as well.

She perhaps learned most from living with two teaching families during her internship. Both families – one a traditional nuclear white family, and the other an extended Maori family – illustrated their total dedication to teaching. Lacey's experience led her to decide that she is not yet ready for that total commitment to teaching, although she may well return to it in a few years.

Getting to know Maori people, and understanding how their history of colonization resonates with her own experience as an indigenous person was a highlight of the international internship. Lacey has been strengthened in her purpose to work for her people in Canada.

Rewards and challenges

Participating teacher candidates have without exception demonstrated that their internships in international settings have included challenges and opportunities far beyond those they would have experienced within Saskatchewan or across Canada. Academic researchers and professional associations alike present a strong rationale for educators to be prepared with, and to act upon, a global view of life and of their profession in order to develop a globally competent citizenry. This rationale includes the ideas that the global reality is that we do not live in isolation; we are impacted by the actions of other societies and vice versa. Teacher educators must not fail to prepare teacher candidates for this global reality. Educators with a global perspective recognize that they face common issues and can learn from one another to improve their professional practice. The teaching profession has an obligation to ensure that all children in the world have opportunity to gain an education. We are preparing teachers who may work anywhere they choose to go.

The increasing numbers of students in Canadian schools who were born in other societies require that we prepare teachers who have understanding of the cultures and life experiences of these students. This suggests that teacher education programs should no longer be preparing teachers only for work close to their home or university communities.

Ten years working to facilitate international internship experiences and supporting interns in international placements, however, has built awareness of both the benefits and the unrealized potential of internship as a form of international study. Areas for further consideration include:

- Some teacher candidates demonstrate confusion regarding focus on practicum and focus on travel; it is a heavy responsibility to represent university and country in the heady atmosphere of being the “exotic” in an exciting new setting.
- Occasionally graduates need to be able to argue the benefits of an international internship in an interview for a position in Saskatchewan and elsewhere in Canada; it must be acknowledged that there are still a few school systems which do not regard international experience as “value added.”
- Teaching an unfamiliar curriculum is a challenge that may have the negative effect of limiting the creativity of a novice teacher.

- An established expectation that teaching be done in a certain way could be a disincentive for beginners to explore a wide range of teaching strategies as they develop their own unique philosophy and style of teaching.
- Being expected to use corporal punishment has been a source of heart-wrenching internal conflict for some international interns.
- Teaching students whose culture does not encourage critical, creative thinking may not prepare teacher candidates to inspire and channel youthful questioning and imagining.

Final thoughts

Developing personal and professional identities takes place over an extended period of time; international experiences (whether internship or other service learning) have the potential to speed up the processes of identity formation through interrupting the ‘accidental apprenticeship’ of their own years of schooling. In a cross-cultural environment, the familiar is made strange, an experience described by the teacher candidates as moving outside their comfort zones. Similarly, issues of vocation, living the teacherly life, are more salient in environments where unconsidered practice is called into question. Given this, it is important that all teacher candidates have opportunities to teach across borders, whether they are international or local, geographical or metaphorical.

References

- Ritchie, J. S., & Wilson, D. E. (2000). *Teacher narrative as critical inquiry*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.