



International service learning and critical global citizenship: A cross-case study of a Canadian teacher education alternative practicum



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A cross-case, longitudinal study about a teacher education international practicum.
- International experiences shape most student teachers as global citizens and this has an impact on their teaching.
- Critical literacy essential for the developing critical global citizenship educators.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to demonstrate how an international experience within a teacher education program shaped student teachers as global citizens. Our cross-case study of two cohorts of student teachers who participated in an international service learning practicum demonstrates the nuanced ways that international placements influence the development of critical global citizens and the impact on their teaching. Survey and interview responses, collected 3–12 months post-practicum, demonstrate that while there is considerable evidence that participants became culturally aware global citizens, there is less evidence that they became critical global citizens, who actively respond to inequities within and outside of the classroom.

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1. Introduction

Many teacher education programs in North America now include international teaching and service opportunities as a part of their B.Ed. Degrees. These are generally short-term placements and in some cases, international service learning (ISL) experiences where student teachers volunteer outside of traditional classrooms. One of the goals of these programs is enhance global and cross-cultural awareness and the ability of teachers to interact more effectively with culturally and linguistically-diverse students in their home countries. Harkins and Barchuk (2015) write, “providing pre-service students with diverse educational experiences allows pre-service teachers to acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for facing the challenges of the global world” (p. 284).

There is much evidence of the popularity of international

experiences within teacher education programs in North America. For example, of the 13 Faculties/Departments of Education in the province of Ontario (Canada), ten now offer opportunities to engage in international placements. Ontario student teachers are keen to participate in international practicum placements. As one participant in Harkins and Barchuk's (2015) study declared: “When these alternative placements came out, there was a mad rush for signing up. There were multiple people applying for any given alternative placement. I think that speaks to how much interest there is out there among the student population in the education program, to try something new” (p. 300).

In response to this demand, the Faculty of Education at Northern University¹ in Ontario offered students an opportunity to participate in two weeks of community learning, service learning, or practice teaching in local, national, or international settings at their end of their nine-month program. This paper presents the results of

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¹ Pseudonyms are used in this article in place of name of the university and names of participants in the study.

a study about an ISL placement at that Faculty. The main question guiding the study was, “How, if at all, do international experiences within teacher education programs shape student teachers as critical global citizens?”

The paper is organized into four sections. First, we review the literature associated with the integration of international experiences into teacher education programs with a focus on Canadian literature. We outline our theoretical framework, followed by the methodology for our cross-case study. The third section consists of our findings, which are then analyzed, in the final section, using a *Critical Global Citizenship* conceptual framework to determine the degree to which our cases facilitated the development of critical global citizenship in our participants. We argue that while there is considerable evidence that the student teachers developed the dispositions associated with global citizenship (e.g. self, difference and global awareness), which in turn had positive implications for their classroom teaching, our evidence is mixed concerning the degree to which they became *critical* global citizens who actively work in solidarity with others to effect positive social change.

2. International experiences in initial teacher education: literature review

As international practicum opportunities in teacher education programs expand, there has been considerable amount of research on the positive impact of these experiences on participating student teachers (e.g. Batey & Lupi, 2012; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Hurtado, Coronel, Carrasco, & Correa, 2013; Kabilan, 2013; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009). Given that this is a study about a Canadian initiative, we focus below on Canadian research on overseas experiences in teacher education programs, noting here that the findings from those Canadian studies largely echo the findings from other related research about international practicum placements.

Research shows widespread evidence of the resulting benefits of international experiences for teacher education students. Of primary interest to our study are research findings on the impact of these programs in terms of teaching skills, knowledge and attitudes. Much of the existing research focuses on the personal and professional growth of student teachers, and especially the development of their professional identities (e.g. Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014; Grierson & Denton, 2013). As Cantalini-Williams et al. (2014) conclude, “[i]t is widely accepted that diverse practicum experiences contribute to professional growth among teacher candidates” (p. 22).

A number of studies show how these experiences enhance participants’ recognition of the global dimension and interdependencies of the world, fostering a clearer sense of the world as a global village (e.g. Maynes, Allison, & Julien-Schultz, 2012; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009). Teacher education students who participate in overseas practicum placements also become more aware of global and educational issues that can lead to infusing the curriculum with global content (Grierson & Denton, 2013).

Evidence shows these international programs successfully prepare teachers who are culturally aware, sensitive, and able to interact effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse students abroad and at home (e.g. Roberts, 2007; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Various studies also demonstrate how student teachers become more open-minded and respectful towards other cultures, and come to appreciate diverse perspectives (e.g. Grierson & Denton, 2013; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Canadian participants in both Maynes et al. (2012) and Mwebi and Brigham’s (2009) studies, shifted their views about themselves and others, resulting in enhanced empathy towards their students.

Above all, the research demonstrates that through international practicum placements student teachers come to realize the importance of culturally responsive teaching, and positive perceptions of their own abilities to teach students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Cantalini-Williams & Tessaro, 2011; Grierson & Denton, 2013; Maynes et al., 2012; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). As Maynes, Allison, and Julien-Schultz (2013) write: “International practica in developing countries can help pre-service teachers internalize key curricular concepts about culture, multiculturalism, pluralism, and multi-racism while supporting their life-long commitment to understanding themselves as global influences on children” (161).

Research also demonstrates that international practicum placements help to develop other teaching competencies including teamwork, cooperative skills and problem solving (Cantalini-Williams & Tessaro, 2011; Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014); enhanced curricular planning and delivery of instruction, cooperative skills, critical thinking and problem solving (Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014; Grierson & Denton, 2013; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). Finally, there is much evidence about enhanced student teachers’ resilience and resourcefulness; as well as adaptability and flexibility to deal with unexpected and difficult situations, such as limited access to resources (e.g. Black & Bernardes, 2014; Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014; Grierson & Denton, 2013; Maynes et al., 2012; Roberts, 2007).

A number of studies also point to the development of competencies for teaching in dual language classrooms and respect for teaching strategies used in other cultures (Cantalini-Williams & Tessaro, 2011; Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014). It is also claimed that international practicum experiences build a commitment to child-centred pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and enhanced communication skills (Grierson & Denton, 2013; Maynes, Cantalini-Williams, & Tedesco, 2014). Overall, the research is clear: participating in international experiences enhances student teachers’ competencies as future educators.

However, with the exception of Trilokekar and Kukar’s (2011) study, there is little research on whether international placements foster critical thinking capacities involving the development of deeply reflexive dispositions about self-positionality, privilege, global inequalities and injustices. While some of the above studies note that students became aware of their own identities and privileges, as well as what it was like to be viewed as a minority, there is much need for research to interrogate the complexities of these developments within the context of critical theories.

Finally, most of the research reviewed is either un(der)theorized (e.g. DeVillar & Jiang, 2012; Olmedo & Harbon, 2010; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Walters et al., 2009); or draws on change and transformative learning theories (e.g. Black & Bernardes, 2014; Maynes et al., 2012; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), cultural competence (e.g. DeVillar & Jiang, 2012), or situated theories (e.g. Cushner & Mahon, 2002), rather than global citizenship theoretical frameworks. This is surprising, given that most of the authors consider international teaching placements as opportunities to develop capacities associated with global education. While some authors (e.g. Black & Bernardes, 2014; Maynes et al., 2012; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007) make reference to global education research, most do not explicitly situate their studies within a global education or global citizenship education framework. Moreover, the selected theories are more aligned with liberal orientations that focus on the role (and change within) the individual, rather than critical approaches that are attentive to power dynamics, social structures and how they influence individual choices. For these reasons, this study was designed as an explicit global education focus utilizing Larsen’s (2014) *Critical Global Citizenship* conceptual framework.

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