

## **The Role of Experience in the Making of Internationally-Minded Teachers**

**By Kenneth Cushner**

*I think it is hard to describe how much I got from going to Ireland. It is so much more than just a teaching experience. (American student teacher in Ireland)*

*I learned that the United States is not the center of the universe. (American student teacher in Australia)*

The problems faced around the world span national borders and will only be solved through the coordinated efforts of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds—or they are not likely to be solved. Among the essential skills required by future problem-solvers is that of improved intercultural interaction—the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with people whose attitudes, values, knowledge and skills may be significantly different from their own. Schooling in general, and teacher education in particular, continues to address culture learning primarily from a cognitive orientation. That is, students read, watch films, listen to speakers, observe in classrooms and hold discussions around issues of cultural difference. This continues in spite of the growing body of research that demonstrates the critical role that experience plays in enhancing intercultural development. The preparation of internationally-minded teachers who ulti-

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mately impact young people in schools, thus, must address the interpersonal and intercultural dimensions of communication, interaction and learning.

Over the years, many schools and colleges of education have attempted to internationalize the preservice teacher education curriculum through a variety of means, from the inclusion of internationally-focused courses, the encouragement of foreign language education, to offering extra-curricular activities that include overseas experiences. Although a variety of these undoubtedly offer benefits to preservice teachers, few of these strategies have the ability to impact the interpersonal dimension better than participation in a sustained, direct intercultural immersion experience like that which occurs during overseas student teaching. Student teaching overseas provides the opportunity for students to live and work in a significantly different community for an extended period of time, and to stretch beyond their traditional zone of comfort—away from support networks, such as their home, school, and friends. Second, because students are generally on their own for the duration of an overseas student teaching experience, unlike many study abroad experiences where they may be with other students from their own country, increased self-efficacy is possible. Third, opportunities exist for increased cultural knowledge, broadened global perspective, and an increased understanding of the value of multicultural education through interaction with children, other professionals, and adults from varying cultural backgrounds.

A number of international and intercultural student teaching programs are offered at universities throughout the United States (Quezada, 2004), including consortium relationships such as COST—the Consortium for Overseas Student Teaching (Cushner & Mahon, 2002), the Cultural Immersion Project at Indiana University at Bloomington (Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003), Global Student Teaching (Kissock, 1996), and the Pacific Region Student Teaching Program (Kuechle, O'Brien, & Ferguson, 1995). In recent years, researchers have studied the impact of these experiences, asking such questions as: what changes are evident in people's thinking, their attitudes, and their behavior as a result of such an experience? More specifically, 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? The purpose of this article is to review what we know about the impact of study abroad in general and the international student teaching experience in particular, and then to explain how experience operates to move people to more interculturally-sensitive and ethnorelative orientations.

### **The Benefits of Study Abroad in General**

Researchers from the fields of cross-cultural psychology and intercultural training have, for decades, studied the impact that an international or intercultural experience has on people in a variety of settings (Billingmeier & Forman, 1975;

Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004; Cushner & Karim, 2004). The role that first-hand experience plays in culture learning has consistently been found to be a critical component to intercultural development (Bennett, 1993; Cushner & Brislin, 1996). The experience abroad, regardless of the level at which it takes place, offers the individual a unique opportunity for intercultural development as it involves both physical and psychological transitions that engage the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. And this experience occurs twice—once during entry into the host culture and then again upon reentry into the home culture.

One of the goals of study abroad has always been to impact students' knowledge base, and several studies report impact in the cognitive domain. The majority of students who live and study abroad, for instance, report that their intercultural sojourn challenged their perceptions of themselves as well as of others (see Cushner & Karim, 2004, for a comprehensive survey of the research literature on study abroad at the university level). Those who have studied abroad for a semester or longer typically demonstrate an increase in cultural and political knowledge (Billingmeier & Forman, 1975), and more critical attitudes toward the host culture (Yachimowicz, 1987). When they return, students who have studied abroad tend to enroll in a greater number of foreign language classes, spend a greater amount of time studying in college, and tend to be higher achieving students than students who do not go abroad (Melchiori, 1987).

Intercultural sensitivity, increased autonomy, and openness to cultural diversity are also enhanced as a result of study abroad (Pfnister, 1972; Zhai, 2000). Students who study overseas have a tendency to demonstrate higher levels of cross-cultural interest and cultural cosmopolitanism than do those who remain at home. In addition, participants also develop more positive, but more critical, attitudes toward their own country than do those who remain at home.

There is evidence of long-term impact as a result of general study abroad as well. Years after an experience, people who have studied and lived abroad continue to have a greater understanding of the intellectual life and traditions of their host country in addition to an increased awareness of the differences between nations (Billingmeier & Forman, 1975). Former study abroad participants tend to become involved in more international activities upon their return home; have more friends, professional colleagues and acquaintances in other countries; and read more books and newspapers in foreign languages than do those who remained at home. Long-term impact on career advancement and personal accomplishment has also been associated with study abroad. Teachers who study abroad, for instance, return with a new sense of authority and a greater desire to share their knowledge and experience with others, have greater academic prestige because of their participation in an overseas program, and are more likely to apply and be selected for additional opportunities for international travel and study (Martens, 1991).

Study abroad impacts the affective domain as well. Early studies that looked at the impact of study abroad demonstrated that participants report growth, independence, self-reliance, and an increased ability to make decisions on their own

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(Billingmeier & Forman, 1975; Nash, 1976). Significant changes in people's tolerance and understanding of other people and their views also occurs as a result of study abroad. There is also evidence that an increase in self-confidence, adaptability, flexibility, confidence in speaking to strangers and gathering information in new and unfamiliar settings occurs.

Evidence also exists that the international experience may generalize to domestic concerns. Those who participate in study abroad programs tend to demonstrate greater levels of cultural sensitivity and racial consciousness, thus making them more effective at addressing issues related to domestic diversity. Thomas Pettigrew (2001), one of the most influential researchers in the field of prejudice formation and reduction, reviewed more than 200 studies of ethnic contact, of which one-fourth involved international contact through travel and student exchange. Excluding the relatively restricted encounters that are typical of most tourist experiences, international contact was shown to have greater impact at reducing prejudice than within-nation interethnic contact.

Behavior also changes as a result of an international experience. For many, the overseas experience sets new direction and focus to their career paths (Wallace, 1999). Some returnees direct their career toward working with other sojourners, and may seek out positions as foreign student advisors or international program coordinators. Some find that the overseas experience has sensitized them to issues and values they never knew they held, and find themselves studying environmental or political issues. And others work to internationalize whatever career they choose, such as becoming global or multicultural educators, international businesspeople, or Foreign Service officers. Others simply become good cultural mediators in their schools and communities, bringing their overseas experience to the domestic front for the benefit of others.

### **The Impact of Overseas Student Teaching**

In recent years, researchers have begun looking specifically at the nature of the international student teaching experience and its impact on professional and personal development (Cushner, 2004; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Bryan & Sprague, 1997; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990). Consistent with what the research says about study abroad in general, student teaching overseas impacts preservice teachers in both personal and professional ways. In addition to being exposed to new pedagogical approaches and educational philosophies, overseas student teachers gain a significant amount of self-knowledge, develop personal confidence and professional competence, as well as a greater understanding of both global and domestic diversity.

#### ***Learning about Self and Others and the Development of Empathy***

An on-going investigation of students who participate in the Consortium for Overseas Student Teaching program (extending the Cushner & Mahon, 2002 study)

continues to support the notion that students learn a significant amount about themselves as well as others, primarily by making the effort to understand another's point of view. COST participants repeatedly make such statement as, "I learned that even among people really different from me, we have a lot in common;" or, "I learned to listen to what others are thinking and saying, and to be less forceful in pushing my point of view."

One particular COST participant demonstrated empathetic understanding when discussing her lack of second language fluency and how it might transfer to her teaching. "I have to get over my fear of sounding stupid, it is the only way I will be able to learn to speak the language," she said. "At least now I can relate to others who come to America and have to learn English. It is very difficult when you are older and can be depressing and scary when you can't communicate what you want to be known." During week two of her overseas experience she recognized the value of empathy through her own disconnectedness, saying, "I have also learned how it feels to be away from one's familiar surroundings and be the odd person out. It is very scary and lonely at times, but you do get over it. This will definitely help me if I ever get a student who is from another country or even state in my classroom." Six weeks later, the student commented, "I can use my experiences to help introduce my students to the differences and cultural experiences our world is made up of. I can teach understanding of these differences since I have become aware of them on a first hand basis. I will also be more aware myself of the differences that each student may have from one another and help these students adapt to a new and possibly difficult situation. Being in a new and different situation has given me the opportunity to relate to a student who may be new to my future classroom. This is one way I have gained more sensitivity."

As a result of an impactful international student teaching experience, students become more empathetic and begin to question their stereotypes of others as well as aspects of their own culture which had previously been unexamined. This ability to place oneself in another's shoes encourages the ability to make isomorphic attributions, or similar judgments about another's behavior. Such a skill is critical to developing effective cross-cultural understanding and maintaining good communication (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Bennett (1998) concurred with this notion when he spoke of the development of empathy, stating; "The communication strategy most appropriate to multiple reality and the assumption of difference is empathy" (p. 207). Empathy, Bennett noted, is the skill that facilitates perspective taking because it enables one to look at another person's life by participating in their experience and to "get inside the head and heart of the other."

#### ***Increased Self-Confidence and Efficacy***

Achieving self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), the belief that one has the ability to organize and execute what is required to confront and handle situations presented in one's life, is a desired outcome of any professional education program. A person

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displaying heightened self-efficacy perseveres and is optimistic about his or her own ability to achieve a given goal. And, there are indications that increased self-efficacy and confidence results in more effective teaching. Gibson and Dembo (1984) note that teachers with high self-efficacy motivate and praise students more, and are better able to guide students in their learning by prompting or offering probing questions. Related specifically to the international experience, Cross (1994) reports that returned Peace Corps teachers had higher self-efficacy and an increased sense of confidence due to their experiences abroad than did a comparison group of teachers.

Students completing student teaching assignments abroad consistently make statements that reflect similar sentiments, such as, “I feel much more confident since teaching in Mexico and am able to stand on my own two feet. I feel I can take charge of situations like never before. My friends, too, have mentioned this to me.” Or, “I’ve noticed that I’ve become more of a risk-taker—not in a dangerous sort of way, but in personal aspects of my life. I’m also not so nervous when I go to interview for teaching jobs.” One student reported, “I was the only African American in my school and community. Although initially scared, I was able to adapt in this environment. Now I know I can do anything I put my mind to after the overseas experience. I’ve become much more independent!”

For many student teachers, living overseas may provide the first opportunity they have had to be independent and make important decisions on their own. Many have to find new housing, pay all of their bills, cook for themselves, adjust to a host family, travel alone, or navigate around a large city—all of this in a new and different cultural setting. Such experiences require individuals to confront their personal anxieties and challenge their own limitations, thus providing the space that facilitates growth of self-confidence and esteem, increased adaptability, resourcefulness and persistence.

It is precisely the difficult experiences encountered during the adjustment process that seems to be what people remember and that facilitates the resulting growth. This is consistent with the research on cross-cultural adjustment reporting that individuals express a certain degree of self-confidence when they recall how they overcame their negative or otherwise difficult experiences (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Statements made by international student teachers reflect this phenomenon. “I was quite overwhelmed and ‘stressed’ at the beginning of my teaching. It was difficult trying to fit into another school culture while learning their national curriculum. I just took it one step at a time and I did it!” Others make statements as, “I know that I can make it through anything no matter what it is.” And, “No matter how overwhelming something seems, you will always make it through.”

Student comments regarding independence and responsibility highlights one of the most profound aspects of the overseas experience. Inside the classroom, overseas student teachers appear to have the same support networks as domestic student teachers. However, when the bell rings and the day is done, students are left to their own devices and must learn to trust and to rely on their own capabilities.

Such an experience is in many ways similar to the first year of teaching in which teachers must deal with classroom management, instruction, and communication without the benefit of another teacher in the room.

Through the combination of having to form new relationships while living and teaching in culturally-different settings, student teachers can achieve self-assurance and a sense of accomplishment. One student teacher summed this up nicely. “Traveling to a world unknown was quite a brave step. I didn’t realize exactly how much bravery I was exerting until I got there. There were many ‘unknowns.’ Prior to my international experience, many little inconveniences would cause me to go into a panic—not so now. While I was in Australia, there was a huge gas explosion and we were out of hot water to bathe or cook with for over two weeks. Trust me, nothing shakes me now.”

***Impact on Global Mindedness, Intercultural Sensitivity,  
and Domestic Diversity***

As is typical in an international experience, student teachers not only learn about themselves, but they develop a sense of their own culture as well as that of others. With this comes an increased understanding of global concerns, how one’s own culture relates to others, as well as an oftentimes unexpected sensitivity toward domestic diversity. Once away from their home country and immersed in the daily life of others, student teachers are able to look back and reflect upon the country they left, experiencing it from a different place and point of view.

Hanvey (1982) referred to this phenomenon as perspective consciousness, and identified it as one of five dimensions deemed essential to the attainment of a global perspective. With this ability, a person understands that their own views, beliefs, and experiences about the world are not universally shared, and that others have equally valid and functional ways of living their lives. A shift in perspective consciousness, both in terms of how student teachers view their own country as well as their understanding of their host country’s relation to the United States, often occurs. Student teachers repeatedly make statements such as, “Now I know that the United States is not primary in everyone’s thoughts, and it is not the center of the universe,” reflecting a greater understanding of world events and a more ethnorelative point of view.

Students who are affected most as a result of their overseas student teaching are those who engage others as well as the experience, reflect upon what is happening to them, and strive to integrate these new perspectives into their frame of reference. This resultant paradigm shift is consistent with what Bennett (1993) found as people develop along a continuum of intercultural sensitivity. This expanded worldview is also explained by transformative learning (Taylor, 1994), which suggests that when people experience something they cannot easily assimilate into their existing meaning perspective, either the experience is rejected or the perspective changes to accommodate the new experience.



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An unanticipated yet welcomed outcome of the international experience is that many students report a growing understanding of the importance of multicultural education and the need to attend to individual differences in the learning process. Still others came away with a deeper understanding of the effort and time required for true culture learning to take place. These are valuable lessons for all concerned with domestic diversity and intercultural learning, lending support to the finding that international contact has a greater impact at reducing prejudice than does within-nation interethnic contact (Pettigrew, 2001). As one student noted, “The biggest change that happened to me was that I became much more multicultural in my view of the world. I believe that multicultural education happens every day, and that this can become a mindset for the teacher—rather than an occasional effort. I owe this to my overseas teaching experience.”

These unanticipated outcomes are consistent with what global educators have proposed. Merryfield (2001) suggests that many educators recognize the parallels between the multiple realities that exist in a community or a given country and those experienced globally. It is this realization that has led them to consider how global perspectives can inform multicultural education. For others, the recognition of the interconnectedness of local and global intersections of power, discrimination and identity turned their attention to domestic diversity in order to pursue local ramifications of globalization.

### **Explaining the Role of Experience in Intercultural Education**

It is one thing to read or hear that in some parts of the world it is common for men (or women) to hold hands with one another in public, not necessarily as a display of a same-sex relationship, but merely as a sign of friendship. I, for one, learned this piece of information when I was young and first traveling, found it quite intriguing, and would use it liberally in orientation sessions for would-be-travelers. It was something quite different, however, when an Israeli Arab friend of mine suddenly took my hand as we walked along the streets in his village in Northern Israel. I just was not prepared for this act of friendship. Here he was, letting others in his village know that I, an outsider and an American Jew no less, was a trusted and true friend and should be welcomed in the community. Unfortunately, this just was not a behavior I was accustomed to, it was not the attribution I made the first time it happened, and I quickly removed my hand from his.

Thus it was that while I may have ‘learned’ this fact cognitively from a book or lecture and could readily share this new knowledge with others, it meant something quite different to me when it happened in real life. It was then, and only then, that I truly learned what this meant. Now, after some time, I can comfortably walk holding hands with Mohammed—and it’s others who have to find their own meaning in our behavior.



Such is the crux of experiential learning—it is characterized by experiences that are affective and personal in nature. And, it is critical to effective intercultural learning (Wilson, 1987). Although technology increasingly makes it possible for people to be in almost instantaneous communication with one another, research continues to point to the critical role that firsthand, person-to-person immersion experiences play in helping people become more effective in their intercultural understanding (Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Landis & Bhagat, 1996; Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004). Experiential learning, which engages both the right and left hemispheres of the brain, links an experience with cognition. The international immersion experience plays a major role in the success of this effort—there is just no substitute for the real thing.

If we truly are serious about preparing teachers, and subsequently the pupils in their charge, to better understand the complex world in which they live and to develop the skills necessary to interact effectively with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, then understanding the manner in which people learn about culture becomes essential. If teachers are truly architects of educational experiences and opportunity they must understand how closely intertwined the relationship between cognition and experience or affect is—they are just inseparable when it comes to culture learning. A deep understanding and commitment to living and working with others is not achieved in a cognitive-only approach to learning – it develops only with attention to experience and the affective domain. It is through impactful immersion experiences where people are challenged to make sense of their new environment and to accommodate to the difference where they ultimately gain more knowledge about other people and a feeling of being at home in a new context. And this takes time. Quick fixes to complex problems that require significant unlearning and relearning do not happen overnight.

Merryfield (2000) suggests that most teachers have not been prepared to teach for diversity and do not understand the impact of globalization in the lives of their students and communities. Interested in understanding why this was so, Merryfield interviewed 80 teacher educators recognized by their peers for their success in preparing teachers in both multicultural and global education. What she discovered is of critical importance to teacher educators concerned with the intercultural development of their students, and related to the overall theme of this special issue. Merryfield's study found there to be significant differences between the experiences of people of color and European Americans that reflect the importance of impactful, experiential learning. Most American teachers of color have a double consciousness (DuBois, 1989). That is, many have grown up conscious of both their own primary culture as well as having experienced discrimination and the status of being an outsider by encountering a society characterized by white privilege and racism. Middle-class white teacher educators who are effective at teaching for diversity had their most profound and impactful experiences while living outside their own country. These teachers had, thus, encountered discrimination and

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exclusion by being an outsider within another cultural context, and they had found ways to bring this to their teaching.

As Merryfield's study suggests, those who leave the comfort of their home society for an extended period of time come to understand what it is like to live outside the mainstream and to be perceived as "the Other." It is the impactful international experience, like that provided by overseas student teaching, that has facilitated many European American mainstream teachers to become more ethnorelative in their understanding of others, more skilled at crossing cultures, and committed to bringing about change through their work. A significant international experience, thus, leads to new, firsthand understandings of what it means to be marginalized, to be a victim of stereotypes and prejudice, and how this might affect people.

Travel and living abroad also affords people the opportunity to experience what happens to their identity when they are no longer in control, and the contradictions between people's beliefs, expectations and knowledge and the multiple realities of others (Merryfield, 2000). As one student teacher remarked, "I learned what it is like to be an outsider, to not understand what others around me take for granted. This is extremely helpful to me as I think about teaching children from different backgrounds now that I have returned home." Recognizing this in a real-life context forces people to reflect and question, thus deconstructing previously held assumptions or knowledge about themselves and others. Thus, the international lived experience sets the stage for developing a consciousness of multiple realities and serves as the stimulus that prompts new learning.

A strong rationale for integrating impactful travel and the international experience in teacher education can be found in the context of situative theory (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Since so much of learning occurs within the confines of a typical classroom setting, behaviors of both teachers and learners often become routine and automatic. In situative learning, the context in which the individual learns is seen as integral to one's cognition. It is the outside experiences and encounters that facilitate the individual development of alternative perspectives, thus helping people see themselves as global citizens and others as potential partners. These outside experiences encountered through international student teaching provide the necessary context for this to occur.

### **Conclusion**

Humans, as social beings, learn best in situations when the complexity of social reality is encountered, examined and understood. Such is the nature of constructivist learning. In the situated learning that occurs in an international experience, the context enables learners to participate in the social milieu of the host setting, develop interpersonal relationships with hosts, build rapport with locals, and identify with a local community. Traveling as a tourist does not allow this to occur and may simply distort and reinforce stereotypic images of many of the world's

peoples. Student teaching abroad, as one means of providing an impactful international experience, sets the stage for people to engage in meaningful relationships, thus opening up opportunities that may otherwise not occur. Through interpersonal dialogue and personal encounters people have the opportunity to learn to see others as well as themselves through new eyes. It is just not possible to recreate the critical relational interdependence of the learner, the activity, and the world in the formal classroom setting.

The lived intercultural experience is, thus, the critical element in gaining a meaningful understanding of other cultures as well as one's own place in an interconnected world. Learning a second culture differs in some ways when compared to how one learned their own culture. When learning one's original culture, the entire surroundings, including family, community and institutions, support such efforts, and there is little discontinuity in what one already knows and what one is expected to learn. When learning a second culture, one comes into immediate conflict between the culture of the self and the new culture to which one is exposed. Reconciling these differences is critical to successful adjustment and subsequent learning.

More than ever, there is the need for preservice teachers to have significant cross-cultural experiences that enable them to teach with, work with, and continue to learn from people different from themselves. Overseas student teaching can be the catalyst that starts teachers on a path of learning from others: their students, their colleagues, their community, and their world. The research that has been carried out to date demonstrates the value of the experience as a way to expand cross-cultural knowledge and to develop a global perspective. An increasingly important task for teacher educators, thus, is to encourage and provide significant intercultural encounters for preservice teachers who typically are not experienced in cross-cultural matters. Teacher education faculty represent a critical link in structuring educational experiences that assist their students to reach out to the international community, both at home and abroad, with the aim of forging relationships based on deep and meaningful understandings of peoples' similarities as well as differences. Schools of education should strive to make this opportunity available to an increasing number of students as a way to increase the skills that we know they will need as they enter classrooms of the 21st century.

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