



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th - June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni



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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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Global Teachers and Practicum in the Global South. A study of Long-Term Impact of International Practicum in Namibia

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Abstract

This paper analyses the long-term impact of an international practicum in Namibia. By surveying teachers who participated in international practicum during their initial teacher education to find possible impact on the personal and professional development. We find that for most, their experience increased their self-esteem, helped them to become creative and flexible as teachers and made them focus on global issues, poverty, and Africa in general in their teaching. The practicum experience in Namibia thought most of the participants to be more open to differences, see the complexity in the people they meet, and be more cautious with stereotypes.3 spaces after the abstract.

Keywords: teacher education; international practicum; long-term effects; Namibia.

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the long-term impact of an international practicum programme for student teachers in Namibia.

Increased cultural diversity in Norwegian schools has forced the traditionally nationally oriented teacher education programs to include a more international and global focus in the curriculum. This is reflected in the new curriculum for teacher education and for primary and secondary schools (Wikan & Klein, 2017). The new curricula focus on global issues, democracy, sustainable development, and intercultural understanding. In addition to the increased global focus, international student mobility is being encouraged. University of Inland Norway has been running an international practicum programme in Namibia for more than 25 years. The rationale for this is that exposure to teaching and living in another country gives the students substantial knowledge, along with the lived experience of another culture as well as experience of education in an unfamiliar context. This might lead to a consciousness of other perspectives and recognition of multiple realities. The objective is to examine how the participants view the value of the experience they gained during their participation in international practicum for their work as teachers in diverse classrooms.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

The potential transformative power of being part of an international practicum program is based on Mezirow's study of adult learning (2018). Adult learning involves a change in meaning perspectives, which are defined as "broad sets of predispositions resulting from psychocultural assumptions that form an individual's worldview". Dramatic changes in culture, affective learning, relationships, as well as collaboration with others might induce transformative learning. To learn to be mindful of other people and open to diversity implies recognition and experience of otherness. The culture shock that many will experience may catalyse a change in frames of reference, which again might lead to increased cultural competence as defined by Deardorff (2006). The experience of otherness is an important aspect of becoming more interculturally competent (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006). Hence, living and working in a different culture challenges the perception of oneself, of others, and of the home culture and country. This is a prerequisite in the transformative learning theory and students may develop "perspective consciousness" that helps them understand other cultures and conflicting viewpoints (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007).

There is a plethora of research on the short-term impact of international practicum. Most conclude that student teachers who take part in international practicum programs develop a more sophisticated worldview, become more interested in exploring other cultures, increase their self-esteem, experience personal growth, increase their openness and tolerance towards other cultures, gain a greater understanding of global issues, and strengthen their ability as teachers (Cushner & Mahon, 2019; Wiggins et al., 2007). Compared to the richness of studies on the short-term impact, the long-term effects of international practicum are less examined (Fitzgerald & Cooper, 2022; Nunan, 2006). However, the few studies that are conducted find lasting personal and professional impacts for student teachers who did their practicum abroad (Baxter, 2011). On the personal level, they found improved language skills, increased self-esteem, and a greater interest in international affairs. On the professional level, studies found an impact on curricular and instructional practices (Kim, Yun & Sol, 2021; Maynes, Allison & Julien-Schiltz, 2013; Klein & Wikan, 2019).

3. Methodology

The research approach is phenomenological, which means that the collection and analysis focus on the informant's perception. "It is assumed that the experiences and knowledge that a person has gained in a particular social context affect his/her way of interpreting and giving meaning to the surrounding world" (Jokikokko, 2005, p. 70). That is, "we are interested in the participants'

interpretation of their experience on their development as a classroom teacher" (Larsen & Searle, 2017, 199).

The main data collection method is a questionnaire with open-ended answers. The participants of study are former student teachers who are now working as teachers. We contacted 35 former students via email and SMS to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. Twelve responded positively, but for various reasons, we only conducted 7 interviews. They had all completed a 3-month practicum in public schools in Namibia. At least 5 years have passed since their graduation. The sample consists of 6 female teachers (FT) and 1 male teacher (MT). This small sample limit the value of the findings.

The questionnaire addresses issues such as professional growth, gaining a global perspective, and intercultural competence. We asked the participants open-ended questions, focusing on professional, personal, intercultural, and global dimensions. The categories are inspired by other empirical studies on the effect of international practicum.

The data is analysed using general inductive approaches. Each participant's response is analysed based on themes deduced from the literature review, so the organization of the material is mainly empirically derived. When analysing the qualitative data, they were initially categorized into the themes of global understanding and intercultural competence. These were further broken down into subcategories of substantive knowledge and new perspectives, as well as the ability to communicate across cultures and personal development. Based on these categories, the analysis was conducted according to the main research question: What has the stay meant for you as a professional today, as well as the sub-questions of teaching about global issues and in multicultural classrooms.

Drawing firm conclusions on the impact of the teachers' former experience in Namibian schools on their present professional development is not possible. The direct impact of this experience might have faded as time has passed and the informants have had other important life experiences. However, Dewey (1938) cited in Baxter 2011, p.27 says, "the quality of an experience is in its 'influence upon later experiences'". Given the distance in culture from their former experience it is plausible to infer that the stay in Namibia was an experience that might have had an influence on present-day teachers.

4. Results

4.1. The Impact of International Practice on Professional Development

To develop a teacher identity is an ongoing process. The informants have worked as teachers for at least 5 years after completing their teacher education when they took part in this study. Trial and error during these years and the process of getting older are likely factors that have formed their teacher identity (Fitzgerald & Cooper, 2022). "Identity is not fixed but being made and remade as we live out an experience" (Kamler and Thomsons's 2006). The stay in Namibia was an experience that might have influenced them, as well as the role models observed during their own education together with what they experienced during initial teacher education. It has been a long time since they had practicum in Namibia, and it is not possible to isolate the specific impact on their teacher's identity. Given these limitations, many claim that it gave them input to reflect upon their own identity and their confidence level and self-esteem increased. Statements like "I became more mature as a person,"(FT2) "I gained increased confidence and security as a person," (FT3)"I got to know myself, figured out who I was, and feel comfortable with it", (MT1)"I gained increased calmness and patience" (FT4) typically come from the interviewees.

Although the role of a practice student is known, everything else is unknown. Most of them encountered teaching situations with large classes, few teaching aids, language barriers, and an unfamiliar school culture. They experienced periods of challenges, otherness, and discomfort which initially were problematic to handle, but when they succeeded, it increased their confidence, which also spilled over to their confidence as teachers (Wikan & Klein 2017). Some mentioned that the stay was "absolutely crucial for me to become a teacher." This is in line with what Kim, Yun, & Sol (2021) found.

Through firsthand experience of a different school system and a different type of teaching style than what they had experienced in the Norwegian school, it confirmed for them the mode they believed was best for teaching and students' learning. It is a common finding that professional practice is shaped by how education looks like in a foreign context (Fitzgerald & Cooper, 2022; Steele & Leming, 2022).

"Do you think that the stay in Namibia has made you a better professional practitioner?" was one of the questions we asked. Everyone we spoke to believed that it had. They had been challenged in the classroom, witnessed different living conditions, felt empathy for students coming from such poor backgrounds, and gained a lot of factual knowledge about a different culture and school system. A couple of them mentioned that they had become better at English.

Namibia is a developing country with a large population growth that qualify the need for more infrastructure is being built and resources. There is a significant increase in the number of school children, necessitating a rush to build many new schools. Often, it's not always possible to equip schools with sufficient resources like books. Additionally, only a few schools have access to modern technology in the classroom, although some schools now have internet access for teachers. This situation was unfamiliar to the Norwegian teacher students. However, today they highlight the lack of available teaching materials and technology as something that was very educational and beneficial for them as teachers in the Norwegian school. Quotes such as "I learned to teach without many aids, such as technology," (FT3) "I learned that you could achieve a lot with limited resources in school," "I have acquired a broader repertoire," (FT2) "I have become more creative because I had to," (FT5) portray the interviewees' experiences. Most of them indicate that they have benefited from this experience and that it has made them more creative as teachers. The stay in Namibia has been "the most educational time in my teacher education," as one of the interviewees said. To sum up, the stay in Namibia was an experience that further personal and professional growth. They had to adjust to a new and challenging teaching situation, and they had to figure out how to live and communicate in another cultural setting. "The combination of experiences gained as a professional practitioner and the development as a person made has made me a better professional practitioner", said FT1.

4.2. Better Teachers on Global Issues?

During their stay in Namibia, the students got to know people with a completely different background than their own and observed how they lived, what they ate, what music they listened to, what they believed in, etc. They travelled around the country and learned a great deal about this semi-arid country. They witnessed wealth and poverty firsthand and learned about the education system. Furthermore, they have realized how privileged their Norwegian lives are and the magnitude of global injustice. In other words, they returned home with many impressions, new perspectives, and a wealth of new knowledge. Many emphasize that being able to use their own firsthand experiences makes the teaching more interesting, more credible, and, above all, provides better education.

Furthermore, they have focus on global and multicultural aspects in their own teaching. Some say that they teach about issues such as poverty, wealth, inequality, and Africa more frequently than what is stated in the curriculum. With their firsthand knowledge and experience from Namibia, many find it natural to draw upon it in their teaching when, for example, contrasting Norway with other parts of the world or discussing indigenous peoples like the San while also teaching about Norway's indigenous people.

When it come to the causes of poverty most blame internal factors as the main cause to poverty and inequality. A typical statement is "I have seen that Namibians prioritize the wrong use of money and can be the cause of their own poverty. They are to blame for their own poverty, laziness, and mis prioritization" (MT1). Only a few state that they have become aware of the structural conditions in the world that hamper development and create poverty in certain part of the world.

4.3. Better Teachers in Diverse Classrooms?

Many claim to believe that they are better teachers in diverse classrooms than they would have been if they had not attended an international practicum in Namibia as part of their teacher education program. One might ask what they mean by the statement "better teacher." Various aspects are

mentioned. Some say that they have gained a better understanding of how immigrants feel and the problems they may face in Norway. This can be related to the experiences they had when they arrived in Namibia and the feeling of being the outsider who did not understand the codes and norms of society. The enormous difference between Namibian and Norwegian society in every possible way and the experience of being the "other" might reasonably have had a transformative learning perspective, as Mezirow (2018) point out as a possible lasting effect of this type of international practice. Having felt this on their own skin has made some of them more empathetic, to be less judgmental and more tolerant as a person. They have experienced what it is like not to be able to make oneself understood and, as a result, have become more aware of what it is like not to be able to communicate in one's mother tongue. One says that this has made her better at working with foreign-language students. Others emphasize that the international experience has made them more curious about other countries, people, and cultures. And, as one person says, "I have gained increased respect for other cultures, particularly the experience of togetherness, community, and respect has given me increased respect for other cultures and ways of life." Another says that she has become more open to cultural differences, realizing that there are many ways to do things differently but equally valid. A clear picture emerges that those who have had international practice in Namibia feel better equipped to work with students from other countries and cultures. They highlight that they have become more curious, attributing the importance of having experienced being the foreigner as the reason why they believe they have become better at working with non-ethnic Norwegian students. It seems that the stay has provided them with experiences and insights that have contributed to them, as teachers, having a certain intercultural competence. This is in line with Bernardes, Black, Otieno Jowi, and Wilcox, 2019, on the effect of a stay in Kenya for student teachers from Canada. The experience from the practice in Namibia may have also contributed to some becoming better at adapting teaching to different students' abilities and needs, not just those with a different cultural background. "It was a useful experience with different languages, cultures, and ages in the classroom. I have become better at adapting my own teaching to the classes I have at any given time," says FT5. Another emphasizes that she has developed "increased respect for diversity, increased respect for the students' differences, not just those with a different cultural background."(FT2) Based on these statements, it appears that some of the teachers can transfer their experiences of working with students in a foreign culture to their work with and attitudes towards diversity in general.

5. Conclusion

International practicum in Namibia seems to have some lasting impact on the personal and professional development of the participants. Increased confidence, a comparative perspective of education, and increased creativity are lasting impacts.

Furthermore, in line with Kim et al. (2021), we find that the stay in Namibia has had an impact on curricular and instructional practices. The teachers claim to have gained substantial knowledge that makes them put a special focus on global issues, poverty, and Africa in their teaching. They incorporate facts and knowledge from their stay in Namibia, which they believe makes their teaching more authentic and interesting.

In addition, the practicum experience in Namibia has led most of the participants to be more open to differences, see the complexity in the people they meet, and be more cautious with stereotypes. Consistent with other researchers, we find that many teachers have developed a broader worldview and a greater international understanding. The practice in Namibia has provided all participants with knowledge about a distant and economically challenged country. They have witnessed both poverty and wealth and have gained a better understanding of the complexity of African societies. Many have got "perceptual understanding", which includes open-mindedness, anticipation of complexity, resistance to stereotyping, and a more open attitude towards others. These experiences have made many of them more critical of media representations of other countries, particularly Africa. They now approach textbooks and news reports with a more discerning eye.

Another significant finding is that all participants have become more conscious of their own values, culture, and privileged lives. The practice in Namibia has given them a new perspective on their lives in Norway and has taught them to appreciate simple things. However, it is noteworthy that most participants do not connect their privilege with the structural inequalities and global economic system that perpetuates poverty in one part of the world and wealth in another. Only one teacher demonstrates an understanding of the global unequal power structure and recognizes the structural nature of her privileged position and the injustices it represents. Our findings align with Larsen and Searle (2017), who also found that few teachers gained insight into global power relations and the asymmetrical North-South relationships as the underlying causes of poverty and inequality. In contrast, a few participants attributed Namibians' poverty to their own misuse of money or laziness. This finding is consistent with Klein & Author (2017) study, which addresses the short-term effects of international practice in Namibia. Considering this, we must question what these teachers are teaching when they claim to place great emphasis on poverty, inequality, and African societies. There is a risk that if many teachers fail to understand power relations and structural conditions as the root causes of poverty, their teaching may perpetuate the notion that Africa is full of poor people who need pity and help, rather than emphasizing the need for systemic changes within the global economic system to promote development in impoverished regions (Bernardes, Black, Jowi, and Wilcox, 2019). Therefore, international practice in the global South can inadvertently reinforce the perception of Western superiority.

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