



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

May 29th - June 1st, 2024
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Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Internationalization in Teacher Education: How can student practice in Southern Africa contribute to strengthening the professional work as teachers in Northern Norway?

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Abstract

How does international practicum during teacher education affect the professional role of a teacher? Can this experience provide new perspectives and practices in the classroom, and does this type of experience in teacher training expand students' competence in global teaching and diversity? This paper builds on a recent research study titled *Teachers in a Globalized World*, involving five teacher education programs in Norway. The study aims to generate knowledge about the long-term impact of international practicum programs. Our contextual framework is based on a teacher education program at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø. As teacher educators, we run a practice-abroad project where student teachers can participate in a four-week teaching practicum in Zambia or South Africa during their five-year master's program. With over 20 years of experience working with international school practice in Southern Africa, we have gained a broad overview of the field. However, research on the long-term impact of student teachers' practice is still lacking. By interviewing former students who have worked as teachers for a minimum of five years in Northern Norwegian schools, we evaluate the value of this focus in teacher education programs. Specifically, we ask how these experiences are utilized in their professional roles as teachers.

Keywords: teacher education; internationalization; professional development; rural schools; diverse classrooms.

1. Introduction

Several studies have shown that international practicum during teacher education can affect the professional role of a teacher in various ways (DeGraaf, Slager, Larsen, & Ditta, 2013; Shiveley & Misco, 2015; Baecher & Chung, 2019; Klein & Wikan, 2019; Steele & Leming, 2022). Baecher and Chung (2020) found that student teachers who completed teaching practice abroad developed problem-solving skills, self-confidence, and flexibility. They argue that international experiences hold significant potential for learning and claim that “international experiences are underrepresented in the literature on teacher professional development yet resonate with theoretical approaches to how teachers learn” (Baecher & Chung, 2020, pp. 33–51).

The development of intercultural competence and global awareness is also frequently highlighted in studies on teaching abroad (Klein & Wikan, 2019; DeGraaf et al., 2013). Short-term teaching experiences can have long-term impacts on the development of the teaching profession (Shiveley & Misco, 2015).

In this study, we explore how such experiences provide new perspectives and practices in the classroom after teachers have worked professionally for at least five years. We also examine how these experiences may have expanded their competence in global teaching and diversity, ultimately strengthening their professional work as teachers in Northern Norway.

We begin by providing the context for this study. Diversity in Northern Norway differs from other parts of the country. Compared to more central areas, population density is low, and the region struggles with depopulation in rural areas. This has led to the closure of several smaller schools, which can have severe consequences for local communities. A common misconception is that the population is homogeneous based on statistics. However, with borders to Finland, Sweden, and Russia, and a population that includes the indigenous Sami people and the Kven ethnic group, the region has historically been highly diverse.

A recent study highlights how Norway’s population has rapidly changed in terms of ethnic background, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and cultural diversity, and the impact this has had on the school system. In 1980, only 1% of learners had an immigrant background. By 2001, this figure had risen to 6.3%, and by 2022, it had reached 19.4%. In the northernmost region of Finnmark, the percentage is 22% (Aakvaag & Bæck, 2024). The fishing industry attracts labor migrants from across Europe, as well as other sectors of the labor market. Regional district policies also play a significant role in the multicultural classrooms of Northern Norway, as rural municipalities host refugee reception centers, creating jobs and income for struggling regions.

Against this backdrop, which provides a brief overview of the diverse classrooms in Northern Norway, we argue that it is essential to prepare students with intercultural competence. This leads us to our research question: How can student practice in Southern Africa contribute to strengthening the professional work of teachers in Northern Norway?

2. Theoretical aspects

Jack Mezirow and Albert Bandura, prominent figures in the fields of education and psychology, have both influenced how we understand learning practices and behavior change. Mezirow is best known for his theory of transformative learning, while Bandura is recognized for his work on social learning theory.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) argues that through self-reflection, individuals evaluate their experiences and thought processes. They engage in activities, interpret the results of their actions, and use these interpretations to develop beliefs about their ability to succeed in similar domains. The reflective and critical aspects of teaching abroad are essential components of students’ learning processes, as highlighted by Klein

and Wikan (2019). They emphasize that conceptualization, reflection on learning, and cultural diversity, as well as the processes of briefing and debriefing after teaching experiences, are crucial for personal and professional development.

We also draw on Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2006). This theory focuses on how individuals construct meaning from their experiences, which are shaped by cultural backgrounds and language. These factors influence worldviews through what Mezirow terms "frames of reference." Within this framework, he identifies two key aspects: (a) habits of mind and (b) points of view. Habits of mind encompass ingrained inclinations and perceptions formed during upbringing, which affect conscious and unconscious thoughts about the environment. Points of view, on the other hand, relate to specific attitudes and values that emerge in particular situations.

When individuals encounter new information that conflicts with their existing frames of reference, they face what Mezirow calls a "disorienting dilemma." This dilemma prompts critical reflection, leading to a reevaluation—and often transformation—of their initial perspectives. Critical reflection and dialogue are essential components of transformative learning. They help learners understand why previously held knowledge may not apply in new contexts and encourage the expansion of conceptual frameworks to include new understandings and practices. This process is particularly relevant in cultural settings where professional practices differ.

Mezirow's concept of critical reflection complements Bandura's notion of self-efficacy. As learners critically reflect on their assumptions and undergo transformation, their enhanced self-efficacy motivates them to implement changes and act based on their new perspectives. Both theories emphasize the importance of learner agency. Mezirow's transformative learning leads to greater personal empowerment, while Bandura's belief in observing others' success fosters confidence in one's own abilities.

3. Method

As mentioned earlier, this project is part of a larger initiative, *Teachers in a Globalized World*, involving five teacher education programs in Norway. The ambition is to produce knowledge about the long-term impact of international practicum programs. Our research framework is rooted in the teacher education program at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway. The teachers interviewed in this study all completed their teacher education program at UiT before 2017 and currently hold full-time teaching positions in various schools across Northern Norway.

This study adopts a qualitative approach. We conducted interviews with teachers who had completed practicum experiences in Southern Africa during their teacher training. To identify participants, we reviewed records of students who had participated in practicum abroad in Southern Africa prior to 2018. From this list, we contacted a random sample and received positive responses from five individuals, all of whom are now working as teachers. The interviews were conducted digitally via Teams in the fall of 2022, with each session lasting 1–1.5 hours.

We asked participants to describe what they considered the most significant outcomes of their practicum abroad. Specifically, we inquired whether their practicum influenced their teaching of global issues and cultural diversity, and whether it changed their approach to becoming professional teachers. Participants were also asked to provide examples of episodes during their practicum that they felt were pivotal to their development as teachers. Ethical considerations were addressed and approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT, 2024).

Using Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Mezirow's transformative learning theory as our conceptual framework, we analyzed the teachers' reflections on their experiences. Bandura (1986) emphasizes that self-reflection enables individuals to evaluate their experiences and develop beliefs about their capabilities. Mezirow's transformative learning theory highlights how adults experience fundamental changes in their worldview through critical reflection on disorienting dilemmas.

Together, these theories provide a lens for understanding the transformative and empowering aspects of international practicum experiences.

We employed an inductive–abductive method to analyze the material (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). According to Timmermans and Tavory (2012), an abductive analysis approach aims to generate creative and novel theoretical insights through a dialectical process between theory and methodological heuristics. In our material, descriptions of mastery were interpreted through Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy, while transformative aspects were analyzed using Mezirow’s framework.

While the small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings, the study offers valuable insights into the field of internationalization in teacher education programs—particularly regarding the added value this type of practice can bring to the profession. Internationalization fosters cross-cultural competence, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of global educational challenges, all of which are essential for preparing teachers to navigate increasingly diverse classrooms. By engaging in such programs, future educators are exposed to alternative pedagogical approaches, diverse cultural contexts, and the opportunity to critically reflect on their own teaching practices.

Our long-standing involvement in student exchange programs to Southern Africa further informs our perspective. This experience has provided us with a rich understanding of the transformative potential of such exchanges, both for students and for the communities they engage with. However, we also recognize that our sustained engagement in this region may shape our approach to the students and the lens through which we analyze our material. For instance, our familiarity with the context may lead us to emphasize certain aspects of the exchange experience while inadvertently overlooking others.

Moreover, the power dynamics inherent in international exchange programs—such as the relationship between sending and receiving institutions or the socio-economic disparities between participants—must also be critically examined. These dynamics can influence not only the outcomes of the exchange but also the narratives we construct about its impact. By reflecting on these complexities, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of how internationalization can contribute to teacher education while remaining mindful of the ethical and contextual considerations that accompany such initiatives.

4. Findings & discussion

When interviewing the teachers, we asked them to identify specific episodes during their practicum abroad that they felt had changed their attitudes toward being a teacher. We aimed to map out what Mezirow calls a "disorienting dilemma," a process in which individuals encounter new information that conflicts with their existing frames of reference.

When faced with new and unfamiliar situations, individuals must adjust their perceptions—their "frames of reference." These experiences often lead to changes in preferences and curiosity about new issues and phenomena. The informants shared several examples of such situations. One teacher described:

«I remember the first time the teacher just left me in the classroom with the learners. They went mad. I remember I ended up locking the door, standing in front of it, and yelling, 'NO!' After that, it gradually got better. I started to think about how to reach them and communicate with them. It wasn't the last time she left me alone with them [laughter]. I remember it was a culture shock. But something about that experience made me a better teacher».

Other informants shared similar experiences. One teacher reflected on how she struggled with a challenging class (as described by the local teacher) and how the experience gave her the courage to

"go fearlessly into unfamiliar situations." Another informant described how the practicum group encountered challenges in addressing the special needs of some learners. They realized they needed more theoretical knowledge, as one participant explained:

«I remember we talked about how we wished we had paid more attention to the professor back home when we had that subject, or that we had a book that could help us out. We wanted desperately to learn more to understand how to help them».

The informant further reflected on their lack of competence at the time but concluded that they had done their best. They adapted their lesson plans and experimented with different teaching methods. As one participant put it: "We learned so much by working like that."

4.1 Mastering the Role of a Teacher

Several teachers recalled the conditions in the classrooms, noting how language barriers and a lack of equipment initially made teaching difficult. However, overcoming these challenges also made them more resilient as teachers. One teacher remarked:

«I remember thinking, if we can stand in front of 40–50 learners in a tiny room and teach in Africa, then we can manage anything [as teachers]. Teaching 20–25 learners in Norway would be no problem in comparison. [The practicum in Africa] made us robust as teachers. We mastered it, and we quickly realized we had to perform, think fast, and be creative».

Another teacher described how the experience made him more professionally conscious:

«I remember I became more aware of my role as a teacher. I remember [they told us] that, on average, there is one teacher per 57 learners in Africa. Classroom management was completely different because of the conditions. When you don't have learning materials, you have to create your own, which makes you more conscious about planning and reflecting on your teaching».

One teacher also reflected on how the practicum experience enhanced his professional awareness, including his appearance and work ethic:

«I grew so much [professionally] from the challenge [of being in practice]. Expecting to dress professionally in a shirt and nice pants, and having to submit a handwritten, detailed plan for your teaching to the vice principal every morning [did something to my professional understanding] ».

According to Bandura (1997), overcoming struggles can create a positive feedback loop. Experiencing a sense of accomplishment builds a foundation for self-efficacy in future situations. Reflecting on their experiences, several teachers noted that while the practicum was challenging, it heightened their professional awareness and understanding of the broader aspects of teaching. One teacher highlighted the importance of empathy:

«Maybe we didn't learn as much new subject content in terms of didactics and pedagogy, but we became more professional as teachers. We understood the importance of empathy—how to be a fellow human being—and how essential these qualities are for being a good teacher».

4.2 How Does the Practicum Experience Influence Teachers' Professional Practice Today?

All the informants emphasized how their practicum experiences in Southern Africa gave them a more "global" perspective in their roles as teachers. Some noted that seeing themselves and their own culture from a different perspective deepened their understanding of cultural diversity. One teacher explained:

«I feel the experience gave me knowledge about how to teach in a diverse classroom, and, more importantly, about diversity in different cultures. We have learners from other cultures in my classroom, or learners who have Norwegian as a second language. Having the knowledge to understand that, okay, these parents raise their children differently than I'm used to because they come from a different culture—that understanding came from being in practice in a different culture. [As a teacher], trying to respect different cultural frameworks, I now look at children differently than I did before the practicum».

This teacher's reflection illustrates how teaching in another cultural context initiated what Mezirow calls transformative processes, involving critical reflection and changes in practice. Another teacher expressed a similar sentiment:

«The experience had an impact on me as a teacher. I think, in general, the education didn't prepare me enough to become a teacher, but that practicum experience gave me an opportunity to reflect at the highest level about my professional attitudes and values».

Since all the informants worked in schools in Northern Norway, where cultural diversity is relatively high, the ability to understand different cultural frameworks was considered essential. One teacher described cultural diversity as a resource for teaching:

«I find cultural differences resourceful, and then it's about how you teach about it [cultural differences]. I use my experience teaching social science, and we focus on relevant subjects. I can use my experience [from the practicum in Southern Africa] as a resource. The [experience] has shaped me as a teacher in the way I meet learners from different cultures».

The teachers also used various resources from their practicum in Southern Africa in their classrooms, including photos, videos, stories, and extended knowledge about the region. One teacher shared:

«I still think a lot about the experience from being there [in Southern Africa]. I talk about it a lot and share it with my learners. We made a video during the practicum to show the other students when we returned home. I've shown that video to all my learners. I remember one class in particular—they wanted to see it over and over».

4.3 Being a Global Teacher in a Rural Context

In this study, we initially asked how student practice in Southern Africa could contribute to strengthening the professional work of teachers in Northern Norway. Our findings suggest that the diversity in Northern Norway requires an adapted approach to intercultural competence. Much of the research on multicultural encounters in Norwegian schools focuses on refugee and asylum-seeker immigration in southern Norway, where the population is larger, and infrastructure is better equipped to support immigrants. However, the diversity in Northern Norway is more complex, involving indigenous Sami and Kven populations alongside labor migrants and refugees.

As cultural diversity continues to grow in Northern Norway, the need for teachers with intercultural competence becomes increasingly critical. The insights gained from international practicum experiences provide valuable resources for teachers, enabling them to create inclusive and empathetic learning environments that respect and celebrate diversity. In conclusion, international practicum programs within teacher education play a vital role in preparing teachers to meet the demands of a globalized world. By fostering transformative learning and enhancing self-efficacy, these experiences contribute to the development of teachers who are not only skilled in their craft but also attuned to the cultural nuances of their students. This enriches education in Northern Norway and beyond.

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