



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

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

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**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

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# **'People are people'**

## **An investigation of long-term impacts of an international practicum**

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### **Abstract**

Study abroad programs and international practicums are considered an effective way of developing intercultural competence and global awareness among students. Most studies on international practicums are based on fieldwork and interviews with the students during and/or just after the international experience, while there are few studies on the long-term impacts of the teaching abroad experience. In this study we examine the long-term effects of an international practicum in Zambia for Norwegian student teachers. We have interviewed six teachers that had an international teaching practicum during their studies five to ten years ago. The material was analyzed in an inductive manner and the findings are discussed in light of transformative learning theory.

**Keywords:** international practicum; teacher education; transformative learning.

## 1. Introduction

A typical strategy for internationalization of teacher education is to send students on different types of exchange programs or practicum arenas abroad. According to Parr and Chan (2015), many studies on international teaching practices and other study abroad programs conclude that it helps students to develop a deeper understanding of global issues and appreciation of cultural differences. Several authors highlight that students who participate in such programs were empowered by the experience (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017), and further, that it led to personal growth and the development of empathy (Tang & Choi, 2004). However, an emerging strand of research also has raised concerns about the possible outcomes of international practicums. These studies indicate that such programmes can strengthen negative stereotypes about other cultures, and especially when students travel from the Global North to the Global South, they might foster neo-colonial attitudes (Klein & Wikan, 2019; Major & Santoro, 2016; Parr & Chan, 2015). In a recent study, Juul-Wiese (2023) shows how culturally shaped and normative educational ideas travel with the students and reinforce the notion of the superiority of 'Western' education in Global South settings.

## 2. Long term impacts: literature review

However, most of the studies referred to above are based on fieldwork and interviews with the students during and/or just after the international experience, while there are few studies on the long-term impacts of the teaching abroad experience. Gaudino & Wilson (2019, 22) write that there is scant literature involving studies with classroom teachers who previously taught abroad to determine the lasting effects on their careers and teaching. In their study they conducted focus-group interviews with 28 American teachers who participated in an eight-week international student teaching placement program in the UK four to eight years previously. They found that the participants in the study felt more self-confident both personally and professionally in their teaching and were better able to work with diverse learners (Gaudino & Wilson 2019, 26). Paige et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study of global engagement among teachers, several years after a study abroad experience. They found that the impact of the experience was clearly manifested in various forms of global awareness. In another study, Kim, Yun & Sol (2021) investigated the long-term effects of an international teaching practicum of South-Korean pre-service teachers doing their teaching practicum in New Zealand and USA. With an emphasis on identity formation and professional development, they conducted interviews with seven former student teachers 1-2 years after they had participated in the international practicum. The main finding was that the participants reported that the experience contributed to personal development, especially regarding open-mindedness towards differences and intercultural teaching competence.

The above-mentioned studies investigated the long-term effect of international practicums from students going from one high-cost country to another. This section reviews research on students going from the Global North to the Global South. Bernardes et al. (2021) investigated the intercultural understandings of Canadian student teachers 5-6 years after they took part in a 3-week practicum in Kenya. They find that although the international experience provided an awareness of the *other*, they failed to address systems of power and to some extent perpetuated colonial perspectives (Bernardes et al., 2021).

Mwebi & Brigham (2009) investigated how a six-week experience of pre-service teaching in Africa (country not specified) affected the teachers personally and professionally one year after their international practicum. The study concludes that the immersion in a cross-cultural context can enable student teachers to see themselves and their own culture in a different light, and thus to become more globally oriented teachers. The authors conclude that an international practicum can be a transformative experience and affect future teaching. However, they strongly recommend that pre-service teachers' curriculum must incorporate understanding of global interdependence and critical perspectives on global issues. Okken et al. (2019), interviewed 17 Dutch teachers, with at least three years of teaching experiences, after participating in study abroad programs in a variety of destinations. They found that the impact of the study abroad experience on personal and professional

development continues throughout a teacher's careers, but that it depends on the working environment.

Based on this short literature review, we can conclude that teaching abroad can be a transformative experience. This is especially related to personal and professional development, as well as more openness to differences. Studies that focus on practicums where students travel from the Global North to the Global South, however, find that critical perspectives on global power relations were lacking, and this might lead to a strengthening of (neo) colonial perspectives.

### **3. Transformative learning theory and disorienting dilemmas**

Many of the studies related to international practicums draws on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, Taylor, 2008) to explain the observed changes. Transformative learning theory describes the process of transformative learning that must take place to achieve perspective transformation. Mezirow (1997) found that perspective transformation can lead to change in the frame of reference, which includes shifts in ways of thinking and worldviews. According to Taylor, (2008, p. 5), frames of reference are structures of assumptions that determine an individual's perspective. This encompasses their beliefs, values, thinking and actions. Perspective transformation comprises a revision of a frame of reference, and thus, an alteration of the meaning perspective. Mezirow describes several phases of perspective transformation, and the catalyst for the process begins with a disorienting dilemma.

According to Leming & Steele (2022, p. 190-191) a disorienting dilemma emerges when the frame of reference no longer is sufficient to explain what we experience in real life settings, and we start going through a phase of reorientation. Leming & Steele (2022) identify several disorienting dilemmas, and of special interest for this paper is how pre-service student teachers must negotiate normative pedagogical ideas from their own teacher training when facing the realities of the Zambian classroom. Other examples of such dilemmas, as identified by Trilokekar & Kukar (2011), are experiences of racial dynamics, power relations or being ascribed as an 'outsider'.

A number of authors that have studied international education programs find that 'culture shock' and experiences of 'otherness' triggers disorienting dilemmas (Cushner, 2007; Leming & Steele, 2022; Klein & Wikan 2019). Tarrant (2009, p. 442) argues that education abroad is the 'delivery mechanism' for a transformational learning process in which disorienting dilemmas leads to reorientations and new values and meanings are shaped. However, several authors note that the culture shock in itself is not enough, it also needs to lead to critical reflection. Thus, the international practicum programs must be designed so that they facilitate critical reflections among the students (Juul-Wiese, 2023, Klein & Wikan 2019, Trilokekar & Kukar 2013).

### **4. Research question, methodology and sampling**

The overarching research question for this study was: what are the long-term effects of an international practicum in Zambia for Norwegian student teachers? During semi-structured interviews, based on an interview guide, the informants were encouraged to tell us freely about their most important experiences and learning outcomes from the international practicum.

We conducted individual interviews with six previous student teachers during January/February 2023. The informants had all been completing a five-week teaching practicum in Zambia 5-10 years ago and were now working as teachers at different locations all over Norway. We sent e-mails to 73 former students and received replies from 10 of them. Of these 10, 6 showed up to the interview session. We acknowledge that there might be a bias in the material, regarding who wanted to participate in the study. Altogether there were five females and one male volunteering as informants. Due to practical reasons, most interviews were conducted by zoom, while one interview took place physically at our institution. Below is a table of the informants and the year of the international practicum. All names are anonymized.

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Year of int. practicum</b>	<b>Interview</b>
Mary	2016	Physical
Nina	2015	Digital
Lisa	2013	Digital
Grace	2015	Digital
Jenny	2015	Digital
Phil	2013	Digital

Table 1: The informants and interviews.

The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We conducted an inductive qualitative content analysis of the material. All three authors read the material individually. Then we met to discuss what we saw as the most important and interesting findings from the material. This process allowed the data to guide the analysis to identify emerging themes and concepts, and it also catered for inter-rater reliability. Based on our discussions we categorized the material under the three main headings; personal development, professional development and focus on similarities instead of differences. In the following part we present the main findings and exemplify them by quotes from the material.

## 5. Empirical findings

Following the results from the inductive analysis we structure the teachers' reflections of the practicum in Zambia under the headings: (1) Personal development, (2) professional development, and (3) focus on similarities instead of differences.

### 5.1 Personal development

When the participants talk about their experiences from the teaching practicum in Zambia, personal development is emphasized by all of them. They describe how they learned a lot about themselves, and they express that this has been important for their personal development. One participant says: «The most important thing, I think, was that you learn quite a lot about yourself. What values and attitudes you have towards the world. You expand your own horizon by seeing slightly different parts of the world and how things work» (Nina). Another teacher emphasizes that you become less prejudiced by encountering a culture that is different from your own (Phil).

Some of the participants talk about the culture shock in the beginning of their stay, and how this was a transformative experience, because they changed their perspectives and had to adjust to the new culture. Grace put it like this:

«When we travelled, we felt a bit like backpackers. But when we got there, I was completely shocked. I wasn't mentally prepared for how 'primitive' it was, and how little they had. (...) I was thinking... I don't know if I can handle this mentally. I also told my roommate. But then a week passed, and we loved being there» (Grace).

Mary has some of the same experience, but the feeling of discomfort lasted longer:

«I had been in Europe and North America, but I had never been to places like this. My holidays had been in cities and beaches south in Europe. I had never experienced another culture, like this. It was a shock. (...) No one had told us that many days we would wake up without water, that the electricity would come and go» (Mary).

Grace describes a memory from a classroom situation that might be seen as a transformative experience. They had brought letters from 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils in their Norwegian twinning school, who described their Norwegian family. The Zambian 6<sup>th</sup> graders should answer and write about their family:

«I'm sitting with a girl, and she doesn't really know what to write. I say: - maybe you can write about what your mom does? - No, I don't have a mother. Ok, what about your dad? - I have no dad. Do you have siblings? - No. I have a grandma. The rest of the family is dead. HIV and AIDS. And then it is like ... Shit. How do you

react to that? And that's everyday life. There were many learners in the same situation. I think we grow a lot from such experiences, as humans» (Grace).

Several of the participants mentions that they got new perspectives on how they live their own lives. They learned to appreciate what they have at home, and underline that it is important to reflect on differences in the world. Nina says that she will take her children to visit the same places, when they are big enough to understand. A kind of formative journey, to create new perspectives on what it's like to grow up under different circumstances.

Some of the participants also reflect on environmental issues. Phil informs that he wrote his bachelor's thesis on environmental awareness in Zambia. He still remembers that an average Zambian must have lived for 37 years before he has emitted as much CO<sub>2</sub> as the round-trip flights to Zambia. He says that this has become an important perspective for him: «I have not travelled abroad since 2014, because I try to reduce travels by plane». Others are worried about the waste of food. Lisa describes that after she came home from Zambia, she thought a lot about the fact that we have so much abundance: «I became very conscious that should not throw away food, that we should finish the food».

### **5.2 Professional development**

Another main finding is that the international practicum is seen as important to the participants professional development, but they highlight different aspects such as: development of language skills; become more creative; more nuanced understanding of global relations; and more substantial knowledge about Africa and Zambia. Lisa says:

«I have something that I can refer to – Africa and Zambia. I used to show pictures in connection with teaching social studies (...). About rich/poor countries and about continents. I am left with something after the practice, both personally and as a teacher, that those who has not been practicing abroad are lacking» (Lisa).

Many of the participants say that the practice has had an impact on their teaching on global issues, for instance that they put more weight on teaching about global variations and that they try to avoid polarization. Nina says that her experiences from the practicum gives her more credibility when she teaches. She has two pupils from Africa in her class, and she has become closer to these pupils because she has been teaching in Africa: «They think that I know something about their background» (Nina).

The participants express that they have got an understanding of variations in educational cultures. This is useful when they meet pupils with backgrounds from other parts of the world: «There is a reason why they bring that packed lunch or respond to this and that the way they do» (Jenny). Jenny also underlines that the international practicum helps in understanding parents from foreign cultural backgrounds.

Regarding classroom management, many of the participants are impressed by the discipline in Zambian classrooms, something they feel is lacking in Norway. At the same time, they are critical to the Zambian teacher's authoritarian attitudes, and that learners could be harassed and ridiculed in front of the class. Mary explains:

«It has made me more aware of how I speak to my pupils. There are power relations between teachers and pupils. I am their teacher, and we should treat each other with respect. They should feel that they are taken seriously and that they are respected for who they are, whether they are 6 years old, 10 years old, or whatever age they are» (Mary).

Others mention corporal punishment: «It was a lot of things I didn't agree on. They said they didn't hit the children, for example, but they did» (Lisa). But the students also reflect on the importance of not appearing as experts on teaching, and that there are reasons for how things are done. «We must learn from how they do things», as expressed by Grace.

### **5.3 Focus on similarities instead of differences**

During the analysis of the material we noticed that several of the participants highlighted that the similarities between people from Zambia and Norway were much greater than the differences. Phil returned to this point repeatedly throughout the interview: «The most important thing is that people are people, there isn't such a big difference. (...) People are people and no matter where you come from, you are searching for a good life» (Phil). Lisa emphasized that: «Kids are kids, in a way, regardless of whether they are poor or rich. I noticed that they are similar». Nina also reflects on this: «Children in Zambia are quite like Norwegian children. (...) They bonded with us in the same way as the pupils do in Norway» (Nina).

The authors have been involved in international practicums for many years, and in the analysis of the material we all found this surprising. In our experience, when we talk to or interview students straight after their return from an international experience, they tend to be very absorbed in all that is different from the home environment. It seems like the years that have passed since the experience have made the immediate impression of differences and unfamiliarity give way to more recognition of the similarities.

## **6. Discussion and conclusions: long term impacts and transformative learning**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the long-term effects of an international practicum in Zambia for Norwegian student teachers. In doing so we have been inspired by Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning, as well as empirical research on international students' exchange. Although we were aware of the conceptual understandings from these models and theories as we developed our research, our strategy when interpreting the material was inductive. After analyzing and discussing the material we ended up with three main findings which we will now discuss in light of the theory.

Personal development appears to be a very important long-term effect of the teaching practice in Zambia. Several of our informants mention that they felt very uncomfortable in the beginning, finding themselves in a very challenging situation. When they learned to master the situation, they became much more comfortable and felt personal growth because of the experience. According to Mezirow (1997), a typical catalyst for perspective transformation would be a disorienting dilemma, where the regular frame of reference is no longer sufficient to explain the experience. We can identify perspective transformation, especially noticeable in the shift in values and world view. The students were not mentally prepared for the emotional effects of being the outsider in a new environment and having to see things from a quite different angle. We argue that for some of the students it does not only lead to personal growth in terms of more independence and self-confidence, but also to become more reflective upon global economic differences as well as environmental awareness. In line with Gaudino and Wilson (2019) we find that the teachers express that they are more competent to work with diverse learners and that they feel greater self-confidence.

The dissonance between educational systems, make the student teachers develop reflective thinking about teaching. This is in line with what Leming & Steele (2022) identify as an example of a disorienting dilemma, when the pre-service student teachers must negotiate normative pedagogical notions from their own teacher training as they are facing the realities of the Zambian classroom. In our study this was especially noticeable regarding teacher authority and classroom management strategies. Although the informants to some extent changed their frame of reference, there can be no doubt that this disorienting dilemma have several outcomes. In line with Juul-Wiese (2023), we also notice indications of 'normativity on the move' in the way the students describe the situation 'down there'. For instance, corporal punishment and harassment of pupils were not something they got accustomed to, although they appreciated some aspects of enhanced teacher authority.

The most striking finding from our study is that by interviewing the teachers several years after their international experience we find that the process of perspective transformation has had sufficient time to mature and affect the perspective. In our material this is manifested in perceptual understanding of "the other" as being very much alike us, looking beyond the apparent cultural differences.

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