

Review of International Teaching Practicums: Preparation, Support, Personal Transformation and Professional Transformation

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Abstract

This review is an attempt to synthesize conceptual deliberations as well as empirical studies of international practicum. We start with an introduction to the background of the current review, followed by a discussion of the methods involved in the review. The review results are presented in four themes of preparation, support, personal transformation and professional transformation. Finally, the discussion pulls all the findings together towards issues related to career development and recommends directions for future research.

Key Words: International Practicum, Teaching practicum, pre-service teacher, Personal Transformation, Professional Transformation

1. Introduction

International practicums for teacher education respond to the need for global education. Traditionally, pre-service teacher education practicums take place in schools near teacher education institutes. However, the desire of pre-service teachers to see and look around the world, and the need to cultivate teachers to enable personal transformation and professional transformation has recently emerged. International practicums promises to challenge pre-service teachers' pre-conceptions (Colleen, 2001), and enhance their instructional creativity and self-concepts (Quezada, 2011). International practicums also help pre-service teachers develop professionally. For example, they may apply what they have learned to their prospective classrooms (Quezada, 2011; Mahon & Cushner, 2002). Although there are emerging empirical studies, findings seem sporadic. There is a need to review the current status of this emerging field so that teacher education researchers may take stock and investigate further. For the purpose of this review, pre-service teachers are also referred to as student teachers and teacher candidates. Although there are nuanced differences between these three terms, for the purpose of clarity, they are used interchangeably in the current review.

This review is an attempt to synthesize conceptual deliberations as well as empirical studies of international practicums. The sections which follow introduce the methods involved in the review, present the synthesized results of the review, and discuss and recommend future directions for research.

2. Methods

EBSCOHOST databases were searched for peer-reviewed articles written in English, These databases include Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Psycinfo, PsycArticles and Psycritiques. Papers published from 1980 to 2016 were included. The strings of keyword were: international practicum, overseas practicum, practicum abroad, overseas internship, international "student teaching", overseas "student teaching" and "student teaching" abroad. These strings were searched under the delimiters of title or abstract.

We obtained 107 hits. From these, 16 papers were selected for analysis on the basis of the following criteria: (a) studies reported in a peer reviewed journal; (b) studies that discussed issues related to teaching practicums. Articles were excluded when they used the term “international” and “practicum” to describe teaching practicums but did not refer to teachers crossing international borders. For instance, the study of Spooner-Lane, Tangen, Campbell (2009) examined Asian international pre-service teachers at an Australian university who undertook practicums in Australian schools. In this case, international pre-service students studied in Australia and the practicum was also in the same country. There was no international border crossing involved. Lai, Gu & Hu’s (2015) work was excluded because the study explored Hong Kong pre-service Chinese language teachers undertaking teaching practicums at international schools in Hong Kong.

3. International Practicums

An international practicum usually refers to pre-service teachers undertaking a practicum in a foreign country. They may take the form of 1-3 weeks (Batey, 2014), 4-7 weeks of teaching assistance and teaching (Kabilan, 2013), 8-15 weeks of student teaching (Cushner & Chang, 2015), etc. The literature suggests that a productive international practicum for pre-service teachers starts with preparation and support from the home country which may end with personal transformation and professional transformation. We present the synthesized findings into three themes of preparation & support, personal transformation and professional transformation.

3.1. Preparation & Support

The literature suggests that successful international practicums require proper preparations and continuous support. In terms of preparation, we borrow four types of crossings from Parr’s (2012) framing to highlight the required preparation for international practicums, including geographic, economic, cultural, and language borders.

In geographic border crossing, the teacher educator and pre-service teachers need to cross borders between different countries. Based on the collected papers, they cross from Australia to South Africa (Parr, 2012); Malaysia to the Maldives (Kabilan, 2013); Wilmington North Carolina to East London (Richardson, Imig & Ndoye, 2013); Turkey to the United States (Ateskan, 2016); the United States to 15 different countries (Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Cushner & Chang, 2015); Australia to Beijing (Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013); the United States to Korea (Firmin, MacKay & Firmin, 2007; 2008); the United States to Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Italy, Spain & Africa (Quezada, 2011); the United States to San Jose, Costa Rica (Moseley, Reeder & Armstrong, 2008); the United States to Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand (Cushner & Mahon, 2002); the United States to Belize (Binbin, Coffey, DeVillar & Bryan, 2010); and the United States to Mexico and San Jose, Costa Rica (Bryan & Sprague, 1997). Geographic border crossing may involve getting familiar with the means of transport, getting used to the climate, etc. Although these studies all involve geographic border crossing, surprisingly only Parr (2012) argued for the importance of preparing pre-service teachers. However, there has been no empirical evidence showing how this preparation may affect the outcome of international practicums one way or another.

In economic crossing, the teacher educator and pre-service teachers need to prepare to cross borders between privileged and disadvantaged communities. While this arguably should be a part of the preparation, only Parr (2012) mentioned this aspect of preparation. In his study, pre-service teachers were engaged in workshops conducted by people familiar with the hosting country as a preparation for the international practicum. These workshops help them understand the expectations of working in a community-based setting, which are under-resourced, and thus socially and economically disadvantaged. Since most of these pre-service teachers are from the middle class, this kind of preparation helped them understand the kind of lives and challenges their potential students face economically.

As for cultural crossing, although it is also recognized as an important part of preparation, only Firmin (2008) and Parr (2012) documented this aspect. Parr (2012) indicated cross-cultural experience can perturb pre-service teachers’ assumptions of the hosting culture. During the preparation period, they learn local knowledge from the more knowledgeable workshop facilitators. This preparation was intended to help students cross the cultural divide. However, other studies found that despite various efforts, pre-service teachers still could not prepare themselves adequately while still living in their home country. For example, Firmin (2008) found despite getting library books, web browsing, making phone calls, checking with others who had been to the country, speaking beforehand with nationals, talking with university professors, learning or reviewing the language, eating foreign foods, and many similar actions, once they had arrived in their respective hosting countries, they were still caught by surprise.

Firmin (2008) further concluded that it was difficult for pre-service teachers to culturally prepare themselves completely while still living in their home country.

In language crossing, the teacher educator and pre-service teachers need to cross borders between English and the home/host country's official language. Firmin (2008) indicated language as the one important aspects for preparation. Pre-service teachers, whether or not they had already learned the language of the hosting country, commented that the international practicum would have been more productive if their language proficiency were higher.

Apart from preparation, few studies discussed support during international practicums. It is conceivable that continuous support, such as emotional and financial support, should play an important part in a successful international practicum experience. However, literature only showed one specific aspect on providing continuous social support. Firmin, Mackay & Firmin (2007) suggested that social support can experience in two ways: distally and proximally. Distally, pre-service teachers need the support of home country's distance supervision, even they do have an "on site" supervisor (principal or headmaster) acting in place of the university supervisor to give weekly guidance through observations and follow-up conferences. They need to have communication with acquaintances and family back home. Especially for longer-term international practicum, the home support is even more important (Firmin, Mackay & Firmin, 2007). Proximally, they need to develop social support in the hosting country. More often, pre-service teachers tended to gather around people with whom they could relate. In most cases, host country's school teachers were reported as a significant source of proximal support (ibis). Social supports from the university personnel, supervisors, and cooperating teachers were also crucial for them (Cwick & Benton, 2009; Firmin, Mackay & Firmin, 2008).

From the above, it seems that although some arrangements are put in place for preparation before and continuous support during the international practicum, they have not been systematically documented and studied.

Most researchers, instead, focused on a twofold transformation at the personal and professional levels. We detail research findings below.

3.2. Personal Transformation

The literature shows that international practicums facilitate pre-service teachers' personal transformation in terms of (a) renewing life skills, (b) improving interpersonal skills, (c) building character, (d) cultivating cultural awareness, and (e) forming identity.

3.2.1. Renewing life skills. Most studies consistently show that pre-service teachers need to renew their life skills and survive when they first land in the host country. They must meet basic needs and solve daily living problems. Taken for granted tasks such as eating, finding transportation, shopping, communicating with home and with one another, and communicating with their host families became personal transformative experiences as they worked in a foreign country. Christine, Stacey, Neill (2008) found that in the beginning weeks of pre-service in Costa Rica, pre-service teachers were very concerned about not having access to consumer products that they take for granted. At first, they were hesitant to try the unfamiliar food and did not know how to cook from the ingredients in the hosting country. Getting a Costa Rican cookbook was mentioned, but when they checked into that, they realized that the cookbooks were also written using a different measuring system from that of their home country. All of these issues were overcome eventually, and serve as examples of renewed life skills.

3.2.2. Improving interpersonal skills. Some studies showed that pre-service teachers improve their interpersonal skills throughout international practicums. Since pre-service teachers had to interact daily and frequently (Ateşkan, 2016) with teachers, students and staff (Kabilan, 2013) of different races, cultures and identities (Ateşkan, 2016), their interpersonal skills were improved.

3.2.3. Building character. Empirical evidences show that international practicums have a positive impact on pre-service teachers' character building. Specifically, international practicums have led pre-service teachers to growth in autonomy, self-reflection, confidence, empathy, trust, determination, enthusiasm, hope, self-efficacy and belief about self and others. Binbin, Coffey, DeVillar & Bryan (2010) found that emotional preparedness, specifically, determination, confidence, enthusiasm, and hope, which are integral elements for pre-service teachers, all contribute to pre-service teachers' character building. Other scholars (Willard-Holt, 2001; Cushner & Mahon, 2002) found that the experience of being the minority led them to be less prone to prejudice students based on cultural background, linguistic difference, or even learning disability.

They became more patient and empathetic and more willing to expend efforts in finding alternative ways to teach children who may not get it the first time. In addition, Mahon & Cushner (2002) found that through facing their personal anxieties and testing their own limitations, pre-service teachers create opportunities for increased autonomy, self-reflection, self-efficacy, the growth of self-confidence and esteem, increased adaptability, resourcefulness, and persistence, all contributing to their character building.

3.2.4. Cultivating cultural awareness. Another personal transformation which international practicums bring about is to help pre-service teachers cultivate cultural awareness such as global-mindedness and the sense of diversity. They became more aware of the diverse world which is not necessarily universally shared (Cushner & Mahon, 2002). Cushner & Mahon (2002) found that overseas pre-service teachers exhibited a shift in perspective consciousness both in how they viewed their host country and its relation to the United States, as well as their own beliefs about diversity. They have become more knowledgeable about world events and less ethnocentric. They learn about their own culture through “turn around” and in effect look back on the country they left, viewing it from a different place and point of view. Binbin, Coffey, DeVillar, and Bryan (2010) found pre-service teachers experiences in their student teaching abroad exhibit group patterns evincing differential impacts and influences on their cultural development. However, it is worth noting that Cushner & Chang (2015) cautioned that international practicums alone without a concerted effort to address intercultural growth are insufficient in bringing about a sustained personal transformation in terms of cultural awareness.

3.2.5. Forming identity. As a final benefit of personal transformation, being in the minority has powerful impacts on pre-service teachers. They begin to challenge their own beliefs about the world and its people (Cushner & Mahon, 2002). Moseley, Reeder, and Armstrong (2008) indicated the concept of perspective transformation, and consequently, transformative learning, is a key element in the International Student Teaching Project in Costa Rica. They found pre-service teachers realized how curriculum planning is closely related to the cultures and traditions of a country. It was through these curricula and lesson planning activities that they began to examine their own cultural identity.

In short, international practicums bring about at least 5 types of personal transformation. We now move on the professional transformations as a result of pre-service teachers’ participation in international practicums.

3.3. Professional Transformation

Based on the current review, at least five types of professional transformations can be identified in pre-service teachers. They are (a) expanding understanding of school systems, (b) increasing pedagogical knowledge, (c) increasing confidence in English, (d) raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students, and (e) improving professionalism.

3.3.1. Expanding understanding of school systems. The literature indicates a short-term international practicum for two to three weeks is sufficient to help pre-service teachers to expand their understanding of school systems. These programs may require them to stay a few days in different locations to attend seminars or visit schools within the same city (Kabilan, 2013; Quezada, 2011), different cities in the same country (Ateskan, 2016), or sometimes even among different counties (Cwick & Benton, 2009). Through these exposures, they gain an opportunity to compare the differences, benefits and challenges of the school systems and working conditions of the two worlds. Thus, they learn how to adapt to different school systems.

3.3.2. Increasing confidence in English. Most studies require pre-service teachers to use English as the main instructional language inside the classroom or communication language outside the classroom. When English is not their native language, even going to a non-English speaking country still requires them to use English as the main mode of communication. Although some pre-service teachers were not proficient to start with, they gained more confidence after attending the international practicum (Firmin, Mackay, Firmin, 2008; Kabilan, 2013).

3.3.3. Improving pedagogical knowledge. Not surprisingly, after attending international practicums, pre-service teachers improved their teaching or pedagogical knowledge. For example, Cruickshank & Westbrook (2013) found that when pre-service teachers were confronted with difference and placed in the minority position, they learned to question assumptions about curriculum, learning and learners themselves. Throughout the experience, they struggled with the various aspects of teaching, including classroom management, lesson planning, conducting authentic assessment as opposed to traditional assessment, and planning curriculum and content in alignment with expectations (Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013; Moseley, Reeder, Armstrong, 2008).

They made some personal adjustments to fit in their temporary host culture and developed a relationship of reciprocal-learning with their collaborating teachers (Firmin, Mackay & Firmin, 2007; Binbin, Coffey, DeVillar & Bryan, 2010). Furthermore, they showed substantive development in planning, assessing and reporting, in classroom communication and teaching strategies, and in fostering engagement and learning (Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013). They became familiar with learning strategies and approaches, including collaborative/cooperative learning, anchored instruction, authentic learning and problem-based learning (Ateşkan, 2016). Subsequently, their confidence was increased and their teaching skills improved (Kabilan, 2013). Some of them even applied what they had learned in the host country back in their home country (Quezada, 2011; Mahon & Cushner, 2002).

3.3.4. Raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students. Studies have showed that when pre-service teachers are put in contact with diversity in the context of an international practicum, they display a shift in awareness and acceptance of diversity, showing increased comfort with differences, and become more aware of differences (Richardson, Imig & Ndoeye, 2013). They show a greater appreciation of other cultures and the capability of children to learn about other cultures (Quezada, 2011).

They face the challenge of working with a class of students who speak a language different than English and become more sensitive to the needs of black students, Hispanic students, Indian students, and students from families of mixed ethnicity and poverty. They also become aware that culture difference might make them have different expectations of students' learning behaviour (Firmin, Mackay & Firmin, 2007; Moseley, Reeder & Armstrong, 2008; Bryan & Sprague, 1997). Subsequently, they can be friends with people who they would never have even spoken to before just because they see them as people, whereas before they saw them as a type (Richardson, Imig & Ndoeye, 2013).

3.3.5. Improving professionalism. Finally, international practicum challenges pre-service teachers' pre-conceptions and expands their professional knowledge, practice and commitment and results in high employment, retention and professional performance (Bryan, 1997; Quezada, 2011). As a result, they may be less prone to prejudge students based on cultural background, linguistic difference, or even learning disability (Willard-Holt, 2001). They have more patience and empathy, and will expend more efforts in finding other ways to convey concepts to children who seem not to understand (Colleen, 2001). International practicums enhance their instructional creativity as well as their self-concept and how they develop professionally; they subsequently apply these skills to their home classroom (Quezada, 2011). Cruickshank (2013) added that international practicums develop professional teaching standards in pre-service teachers.

4. Discussion

The above review can be summarized in Table 1. International teaching practicums transform pre-service teachers' personal and professional knowledge, resulting in higher employment, retention and professional performance. However, without continuous boundary crossing, preparation and support from universities and schools in the home and host country, it would be impossible to achieve the goal. Table 1 summarizes aspects of the issues covered by various researchers.

Table 1. Summary of issues covered by various researchers

Research	Preparation & Support	Personal Transformation	Professional Transformation
Ateşkan (2016)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving interpersonal skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving pedagogical knowledge
Binbin, Coffey, DeVillar & Bryan (2010)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building character Cultivating cultural awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving pedagogical knowledge
Bryan, & Sprague (1997)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students
Colleen (2001)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving professionalism
Cruikshank & Westbrook (2013)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving pedagogical knowledge Improving professionalism
Cushner & Chang (2015)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivating cultural awareness 	
Cushner & Mahon (2002)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building character Cultivating cultural awareness Forming identity 	
Cwick & Benton (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous support 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding understanding of school systems
Firmin, Mackay & Firmin (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous support 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving pedagogical knowledge Raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students
Firmin, Mackay & Firmin (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous support 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing confidence in English
Kabilan (2013)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving interpersonal skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding understanding of school systems Increasing confidence in English Improving pedagogical knowledge
Mahon & Cushner (2002)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving pedagogical knowledge
Moseley, Reeder & Armstrong (2008)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forming identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving pedagogical knowledge Raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students
Richardson, Imig & Ndoye (2013)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students
Parr (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation 		
Quezada (2011)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding understanding of school systems Improving pedagogical knowledge Raising awareness and acceptance of diverse students Improving professionalism

Upon further analysis we offer two directions for future studies.

4.1. Applying border thinking to geographic border crossing. We suggest that the border thinking methodology proposed by Ghiso & Campano (2013) as a potential direction to study geographic border crossing for international practicums. Table 1 shows while 13 papers involved geographical border crossing preparation, only Parr (2012) discussed this preparation in relation to international teaching practicums. Theoretically, seeing preparation through the lens of border crossing seems promising. This lens has been used extensively in studies related to education for immigrants. For example, Ghiso & Campano (2013, p. 253) enacted a border thinking methodology by examining the discursive construction of knowledge about immigration in two geographic spaces whose “border” many students navigate: a school context meant to support English Language learners and an out-of-school faith-based organization serving immigrant communities.

Therefore, when pre-service teachers go from across a geographic border, not only do the means of transport and climate change, but the discourse changes as well. This makes the pre-service teachers the minority, and results in personal and professional transformation. However, there is a lack of empirical study examining how these framings work. Similarly, other crossings, such as economic, cultural and language, can also be studied by employing theories from other related fields.

4.2. Localizing good practices Pre-service teachers may gain professional knowledge such as teaching strategies. While these may be suitable for the context of the hosting country, we cannot assume that these can be directly applied to the home country. For example, from a recent interview in one of our studies, a pre-service teacher in Singapore attended a practicum in Taiwan to observe and assist in a Chinese language class. She noted that although she was convinced of the flipped classroom design, she felt that it was feasible because Chinese is the first language of most students in Taiwan. However, this is not the case in Singapore where students studying Chinese may come from English speaking families. Therefore, the flipped classroom idea may not necessarily work in Singapore. A certain degree of local contextualisation is needed. Therefore, it may be productive in the future to study the process of how good practices in the hosting country can be localized in the home country. Results of such study may inform our design of international practicums, allowing us to take pre-service teachers all the way to their classroom teaching in the home country. This is consistent with the recent adoption of the idea of “glocalization”. Brooks & Normore (2010) explored how the concept of glocalization, a meaningful integration of local and global forces, can help educational leaders inform and enhance their pedagogy and practice.

4.3. Complementing international and local practicums for better career development The current review has identified benefits of international practicums, among which personal transformation seems particularly unique and may be something that local practicums cannot achieve easily. In addition, in terms of professional growth, it is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, from the perspective of career prospects in the local country, international practicums offer limited professional growth, whereas pre-service teachers need to localize what they have learned overseas (as discussed in the previous section). On the other hand, it can become an advantage if eventually the career prospect is in the hosting country. For example, one Taiwanese student who went to an international practicum in Singapore eventually got hired as a Chinese language teacher after graduating from our teacher education program.

Furthermore, the advantages of local practicums are that they expose pre-service teachers to the local context, e.g., the school system, curriculum and students, thus providing a smooth transition into their teaching practices (Lawson, Çakmak, Gündüz & Bushera, 2015). This is not what international practicums offer. Therefore, we do not believe that local practicums can be replaced entirely by international practicums. The two should complement each other. In the current review, we did not find a study on how these two kinds of practicums can be designed in complementary way to maximize pre-service teachers’ personal transformation, professional transformation and career development. In terms of career development, pre-service teachers not only find opportunities locally, they may also take advantage of international practicum experience, which can be described as a form of global mobility (Widegren & Doherty, 2010), to gain a broader perspective in the hosting country. We recommend that future studies look into this aspect.

5. Conclusion

In the current review, we have showed that international practicums require proper preparation from the perspectives of geographic, economic, cultural and language crossings. International practicums particularly benefit to pre-service teachers’ personal transformation. These may include life skills, improving interpersonal skills, fostering character, cultivating cultural awareness and forming identity. In terms of professional transformation, these practicums expand understanding of school systems, increase pedagogical knowledge, increase confidence in English as the instructional language, improve teaching skills, develop classroom management skill, raise awareness and acceptance of diverse students and improve professionalism.

We highlighted the importance of glocalizing what pre-service teachers learn from international practicums to the local context. We also suggest taking a holistic perspective to complement local and international practicums for better career development both locally and internationally. An exciting journey is ahead of us; we invite interested researchers to join us in this adventure.

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