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## Preparing Teacher Interns for International Teaching: A Case Study of a Chinese Practicum Program

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### Cover Page Footnote

Gregory MacKinnon, PhD is a Professor of Science and Technology Education at Acadia University, School of Education. He has coordinated International Practicum Placements in China since 2002. As a retired school administrator, Robert Shields has taught courses at Acadia University as an adjunct part-time instructor.

## **Preparing Teacher Interns for International Teaching: A Case Study of a Chinese Practicum Program**

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### **Abstract**

Acadia University, a small liberal arts institution, has for over 15 years, offered a unique practicum experience for its teacher interns enrolled in the preservice Bachelor of Education. Students travel to Shanghai, China for a period of four months to teach English as a Second Language in school classrooms ranging from grades kindergarten to six. This paper describes the preparation of interns and the inherent challenges they face as pedagogues in a distinctly different teaching context. This action research account seeks to used mixed methods to identify areas of improvement in the process of preparing beginning teachers for a career in international teaching.

**Keywords:** International teaching, teacher education

### **Introduction**

The curriculum for preparing students to be teachers has arguably changed dramatically in the past decade (Canrinus, Bergem, Klette & Hammerness, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2017) and rightly so as the nature of teaching opportunities has transitioned. In most jurisdictions, regional employment opportunities tend to oscillate contingent on factors of teacher attrition and declining pupil populations (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, & Merrill, 2012). This has been countered however, by the ease of travel worldwide and the emergent reality that teaching can be plied in many contexts across the public/private school continuum, industry and even corporate business settings. When the graduating teacher looks at the world as their workplace, this decidedly adjusts their outlook on employment opportunities.

With the broadening workplace in mind, it is incumbent on teacher educators to better prepare teacher interns with an extended range of skills necessary for an international career.

One component identified as crucial to the education of teachers is the practicum experience (Rozelle, 2012). In a small liberal arts institution in Canada, students have, since 2002, had the opportunity to undertake a four-month practicum experience in Shanghai, China. This paper serves to deconstruct the narrative of 10 students as they adapted to teaching in public schools in one the world's largest cities. As an action research endeavor, (Beulieu, 2013; Sagor, 2004; Stringer, 1996) an overall goal of the research was to improve the specialized education of interns afforded prior to their leaving for this extended internship. In analyzing the challenges faced by interns and their concomitant responses, the research attempts to illuminate the process of conceptual change as it relates to the teacher intern's personal growth as a pedagogue.

## **Literature**

### **Best Practices in Teacher Education**

In many institutions worldwide, the content and processes advanced by teacher education programs, are constantly being revisited to ensure that graduated teachers have the appropriate skill set to address the realities of public-school teaching. Most recently, the notion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Häkkinen, Järvelä, Mäkitalo-Siegl, Ahonen, Näykki, & Valtonen, 2017; Lambert and Gong, 2009) has guided this process of curriculum renewal. Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe and Terry (2013) have suggested teachers and students alike need an extended range of skills to integrate in an increasingly technological society (see Figure 1). They emphasize the importance of foundational knowledge (to Know), humanistic knowledge (to Value) and meta-knowledge (to Act).

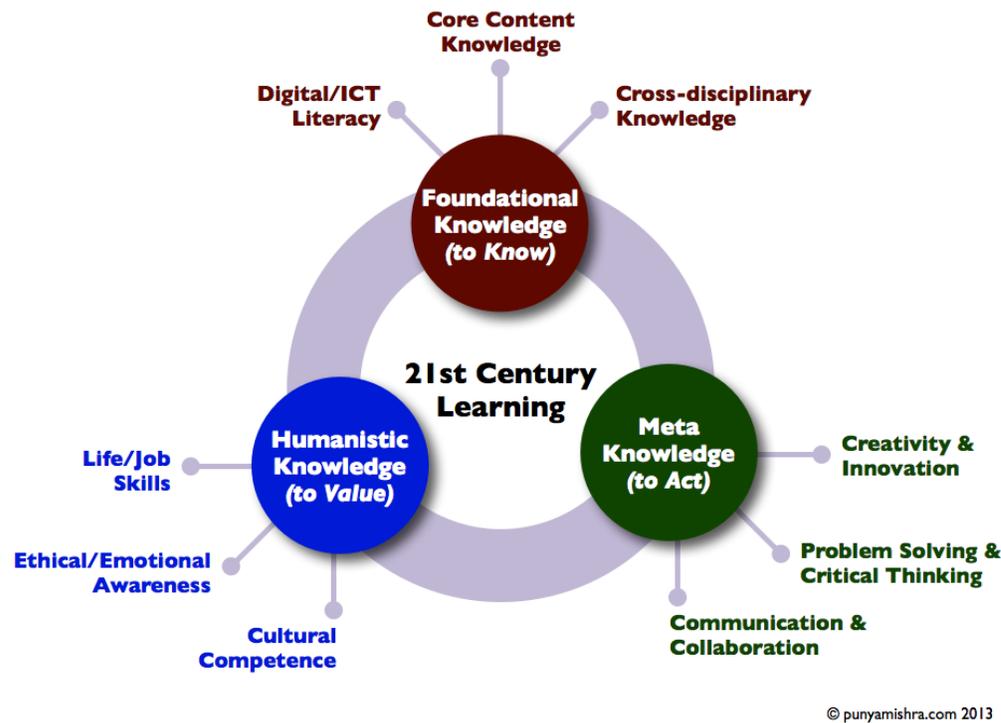


Figure 1. Synthesis of 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge models (used with permission from: Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe & Terry, 2013)

The work of Darling-Hammond (2012) is arguably the most influential in terms of directing our attention to quality programs. She has identified eight key areas of consideration outlined below.

- Coherence, based on a common, clear vision of good teaching grounded in an understanding of learning that permeates all coursework and clinical experiences;
- A strong core curriculum, taught in the context of practice, grounded in knowledge of child and adolescent development, learning in social and cultural contexts, curriculum, assessment and subject-matter pedagogy;
- Extensive, connected clinical experiences that are carefully developed to support the ideas and practices presented in simultaneous, closely interwoven course work;

- Well-defined standards of professional knowledge and practice are used to guide and evaluate course work and clinical work;
- Explicit strategies that help students (a) confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning and students and (b) learn about the experiences of people different from themselves;
- An inquiry approach that connects theory and practice, including regular use of case methods, analyses of teaching, and learning, and teacher research applying learning to real problems of practice and developing teachers as reflective practitioners;
- Strong school-university/college partnerships that develop common knowledge and shared beliefs among school and university/college-based faculty, allowing candidates to learn to teach in professional communities modelling state-of-the-art practice for diverse learners and collegial learning for adults; and
- Assessment based on professional standards that evaluates teaching through demonstration of critical skills and abilities using performance assessments and portfolios that support the development of adaptive expertise.

### **Internationalizing Programs**

Of the criterion suggested by Darling-Hammond (2012), offering teacher interns a quality clinical experience that maps onto the learners they are likely to encounter, has never been more important. Furthermore, a practicum in a foreign setting aligns with Kereluik et al (2013) in developing a cultural awareness in 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers. Consider the following assertions made about teacher education candidates.

Migration is changing the demographic fabric of our communities, bringing us in daily contact with people from around the globe...Our education system is not preparing young people for this new reality. Recent education reform efforts have focused heavily on improving reading, math, and science education. These efforts, while important, cannot ensure that students will develop the knowledge of world regions and global issues, languages and cross-cultural skills, and values of citizenship and collaboration that are so important to living and working in an increasingly interdependent world. (Longview Foundation, 2008, p. 4)

In their publication entitled “Teacher Preparation for the Global Age: The Imperative for Change”, the Longview Foundation has further recommended (Table 1) the following framework for internationalizing teacher preparation. They contend that given the mobility of students in the world today as well as mass migration of ethnic groups, that teacher interns require a broader understanding of the impact of culture on education.

**Revising teacher preparation programs to ensure that:**

- General education coursework helps each prospective teacher develop deep knowledge of at least one world region, culture, or global issue, and facility in one language in addition to English
- Professional education courses teach the pedagogical skills to enable future teachers to teach the global dimensions of their subject matter
- Field experiences support the development of pre-service teachers’ global perspectives.

**Facilitating at least one in-depth cross-cultural experience for every pre-service teacher by:**

- Promoting study or student teaching in another country, or service-learning or student teaching in a multicultural community in the United States
- Financial support for such experiences
- Appropriate orientation, supervision, and debriefing to tie these experiences to prospective teachers’ emerging teaching practice.

**Modernizing and expanding programs for prospective world**

**language teachers by:**

- Preparing more teachers to teach less commonly taught languages
- Updating language education pedagogy based on current research and best practice.

**Creating formative and summative assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of new strategies in developing the global competence of prospective teachers. (p6)**

*Table 1.* Internationalizing teacher education (Longview Foundation, 2008)

While the potential promise of a teaching career abroad constitutes one impetus for curricular change, the varied demographic of schools is also of concern. New teachers are often compelled to differentiate instruction for a much wider range of nationalities that populate our classrooms. In their teacher education programs, they need more experience with diverse learners. As early as 2002, Cushner and Mahon suggested that,

to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, schools must successfully teach many more students from increasingly diverse backgrounds while preparing them for a much more complex, interdependent world that most teachers themselves are not familiar with. Numerous teacher educators point to the critical role that extended field experiences offer in assisting preservice teachers to improve their understanding and ability to work with students of diverse backgrounds.

(p. 45)

Cushner and Mahon (2002) further suggest that an extended timeframe in practice may have greater impact.

Developing the skills that enable an individual to live and work effectively among individuals from cultures other than their own requires significant, long term, direct

personal interaction with people and contexts different from those which one is most familiar. International student teaching provides an ideal way to address this. (p. 45)

In considering the potential of extended practica in other cultures, it seems the importance of pragmatic action research in teacher education is implied (Ariizumi, 2005; Hine, 2013). While we can place teacher interns in remote practica, how do we best prepare them for the adaptations to pedagogy, culture and school politics they will no doubt encounter. This study will illuminate the factors that must be considered as one embarks on internationalizing teacher education programs through innovative practicum experiences.

### **Context: Current Preparation of Interns**

Since 2002, approximately 150 teacher interns at Acadia University in North America, have been placed for the final practicum experience in China. This four-month component is a required course in their two-year post-degree Bachelor of Education (BEd). A Chinese requirement for the placement is that teachers also have English as a second language training. To that end, the BEd program offers the option to study Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) as part of the elective selection in the curriculum. Some students choose to study TESOL without undertaking the Chinese practicum as they believe it, “expands my options when I finish to teach abroad.” The importance of supplementing teacher education with the TESOL opportunity has been well-established. (Crookes, 2003). From the first year of their program, students’ progress is monitored to judge whether their attitude, confidence and skill level is such that an international placement is an appropriate choice given their place on the developmental continuum of struggling novice to intuitive teacher.

The program sequence over two years involves 10-week blocks of theory courses each of four semesters followed by a five-week block of teaching practice each semester for a total of 20

weeks. This is ample time to assess the readiness of interns and their inherent attitudes/predispositions for cultural adaptation. The assessment of intern suitability occurs in a) intern-faculty discourse during course work and b) observed classroom practice via faculty supervision during the standard practicum period. During the early practicum supervision, particular attention is paid to the interns' reaction to constructive criticism and the professional assertiveness and poise they exhibit in responding as a reflective practitioner. Based on cumulative feedback from university lecturers, practicum supervisors and mentor teachers, a most suitable cohort is selected for the experience. Typically, 10-20% of applicants are dropped from the cohort for the aforementioned developmental reasons, as well as personal challenges associated with planning for a four-month period abroad.

With regard to further preparation, students entering their second year, begin attending weekly cohort sessions that consider a) most suitable pedagogies, b) cultural difference, c) living in China, d) travel preparation and e) responsible diplomacy. The faculty member leading the workshops actually travels with the interns to China and with the pivotal assistance of a liaison company, situates students in apartments and schools before formal teaching begins (primarily at the elementary education level-primary-seven). In this program, all teaching in China is English as a Second Language (ESL) sometimes also referred to as English as Foreign Language (EFL). One role of interns is to expose young students to cultural difference through context-rich lessons that explore comparative traditions meanwhile uncovering new words. This approach is thought to motivate children to take up English as a useful language. For older students, the teacher's role changes to include teaching of grammatical structure and ultimately facile conversation. Supervision of teaching by both the university and the liaison company in conjunction with the

formation of a learning community amongst the intern cohort, ensures that effective collaboration, reflection and feedback scaffold the teaching experience.

Interns in their final semester prior to leaving for China, were enrolled in a course entitled Foundations of Schooling. In this course, they investigated the prominent ideologies regarding teaching and learning since the time of Socrates. A description of the course is offered here by the instructor (Shields, 2018).

In the Foundations of Education course students independently researched and briefly presented philosophical and pedagogical theories in history from Classical to Contemporary times attending to the Social, Economic and Political characteristics of the various movements and periods. Participants chose one significant educational theorist from a broad and varied list provided.

Fundamental beliefs of psychology and child development of the particular time periods were also considered. The overall objective of this assignment was to see the similarities, differences and trends of educational thought over time.

Considering the conceptual perturbation that students would soon undergo, as they were exposed to Chinese pedagogical philosophies, this course was an apt introduction to thinking about the interface of culture and educational aims of schooling.

### **Research Methods**

Practicum experiences can only hope to be improved if evidence-based decisions are made regarding enhancements of the system which includes consideration of both preparation for and undertaking of, the practicum. Action research (Beaulieu, 2013; Sagor, 2004; Stringer, 1996) has great potential to illuminate the complexity of such systems that draw on the

qualitative narrative of participants. Koshy (2005) has recommended a simple model of plan-act-observe-reflect. A graphic representation is presented in Figure 2 (Interactive Design Foundation, 2016). This study has been designed to inform a systemic change. As such, the intent is to take action on the findings and improve the practicum experience. A mixed methods approach was taken with a naturalistic lens on a very complex teaching and learning experience. The practicum experience has been captured in an anecdotal format for approximately 17 years. A more formalized action research approach has allowed for a longitudinal strategy for acting on stakeholder feedback in the future.



Figure 2. An action research cycle (used with permission from editor in chief at [www.interaction-design.org](http://www.interaction-design.org) )

In the iteration that accompanied a recent experience (spring 2017), interns, through one of their final courses entitled Foundations of Schooling were asked to reflect on their ongoing

experiences in China. This was done with the backdrop of having studied in the course, the most influential educational ideas over the centuries. Interns were expected to provide this reflective narrative on a regular basis. The so-called, letters-to-Bob were most frequently expressed in text, sometimes as blogs, but also through narrated video using internet repositories. The condition was that the expression be less of a formal report and more of a colloquial description of ‘days in the life of’ responding to issues of school contexts, curriculum, culture and life as a visiting teacher. This was a course requirement and the primary researcher, in an effort to avoid conflict of interest, was not involved in collection of these artefacts. Interns were all given the option of restricting the use of their course writing, yet all ten agreed to participate in the action research.

Interns were observed by university representatives during their classroom teaching in elementary schools of Shanghai, China for approximately four hours (on average) in two separate supervision periods, one near the beginning of their experience and one after 10 weeks of teaching practice. While standard supervision templated forms were completed, these were supplemented with field notes (Adler & Adler, 1994; Patton, 2002). In addition, the field notes were deconstructed through interviews with the supervising mentor. It is important to note that the formal practicum course ended after 10 weeks of 20 hours per week teaching, however the interns continued at their schools with the same load/schedule for a four-month period where they were regularly supervised by the liaison company exclusively.

When interns completed their Shanghai placement and returned to Canada, they were each asked (sample, n=10) to identify in writing their 3 biggest challenges with teaching and living in China. From these responses, a standardized open-ended interview schedule was created (Patton, 2002). The interviews served to corroborate the 10 written responses but also to

expand on the relationship between the extent of practicum experience and the inherent challenges faced. The interview questions were piloted with two teachers distant from the work in order to remove any question ambiguity. Five students were chosen randomly to participate in a one-hour interview. The interview was structured using a matrix technique (Sagor, 2002; Sagor & Williams, 2016) that addressed the challenges interns faced at the beginning, the middle and end of their four-month practicum. The interview findings, written responses (i.e. three biggest challenges) and the letters-to-Bob were compiled and coded for emergent themes (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The themes were reviewed, corroborated and supplemented via a two-hour interview with the university instructor administering the Foundations of Schooling course. The cumulative empirical materials were further triangulated through two separate focus groups (Kreuger, 2009; Morgan, 1997) sessions involving three and two participant interns respectively.

## **Findings**

### **What Were the Challenges and When Did They Emerge?**

It is an important declaration that life of interns in China was not complicated by financial pressures. The liaison company supported all interns financially by providing return airfare, accommodation, food allowance, school travel allowance and health insurance.

From initial discussions with interns, it was obvious that the challenges changed over the course of the interns' time in China. It was decided that a matrix approach (Sagor & Williams, 2017) of a limited longitudinal nature (i.e. beginning, midpoint, end of four-month experience) would be useful in understanding the intern experience.

As interns described their approach to the task of teaching in China, they had both anticipation and initial experience to allude to. Clearly, they had been afforded weekly

preparatory sessions, but this could not wholly prepare them for the reality of engaging the actual living and teaching context. Table 2 describes the shared phenomena (Van Manen, 1990) coded in categories emergent from intern letters, identified challenges and interviews.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Expectations	The responsibilities as defined by liaison company & schools is muddy
Large classes	This limited the pedagogical choices & relied heavily on management skills
Classroom management	The importance of establishing standards of behavior are complicated by the language barrier & a propensity to avoid an authoritarian stance in favor of a socio-emotional approach
Communication systems	The importance of establishing teacher-student interaction models becomes evident e.g. repeating & responding protocols
Curriculum challenges	Topics to teach are often defined; desired outcomes not clear; use of textbooks at times required but not available to students
English grammar teachers in the schools	Chinese teachers with a good command of the English language intimidated interns who emphasized conversation over grammatical structures
Support systems	Adjusting to the lack of books, photocopying, lead teacher input, lack of school administration direction around school policies, schedules, protocols etc.
Reliance on technology	The level of instructional technology available was often significantly less in China by comparison to North America. Technology that was available had to be finessed around language barriers (e.g. software)
Differentiating	Difficulties assessing the levels of English proficiency
Building school relationships	Chinese teachers were not always welcoming (re: collaboration /assistance) primarily due to shyness/perception that their English proficiency was poor-intern social isolation was counterproductive
Tension between authoritarian & socioemotional pedagogies	Chinese teachers who may have ultimate responsibility for students prefer authoritarian approaches and pressure interns to conform
Student-centred learning	Large classes and communication barriers complicate the establishment of constructivist learning environments
Assessment - driven systems	While the impact of teaching of English wasn't always evaluated, students were distracted by dogged preparation for other testing
Newness	Interns exhibit an abundance of energy; students are excited to have a "foreign" teacher with decidedly inductive teaching approaches
Self-image	Chinese widespread fascination with interns' physical difference in appearance is playfully accepted. Self-image positive.

*Table 2.* Anticipation and the initial experience

Table 3 delineates challenges and changes in the dynamic of teaching near the midpoint of the interns' teaching. Further it describes the shared phenomena (Van Manen, 1990) coded in categories emergent from intern letters, identified challenges and interviews.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Job description	The expectations of the school and the liaison company became clearer-interns could relax in knowing they were meeting the expectations of the system
Arbitrary occurrences	Government/regional/school education authorities use top down model to inform school-wide or class cancellations-lack of communication with intern hampers intern productivity
Competing models	Tension between constructivist pedagogies & deductive teaching insisted upon by Chinese lead teachers
Life style balance	Tension eased around commuting & orienteering in the city/school; allowed for more concentration on teaching
Class sizes	Managing large numbers of students exhibits toll on energy level of interns sometimes contributing to less diversity in lessons
Student routines	Chinese children become more accustomed to classroom rules & routines; less intern energy spent on setting up interaction strategies
Resource Base	A solid understanding of the resource base i.e. what instructional aids the intern has to work with in offering up lessons
Peer support	A community of learners established amongst intern cohort allows for sharing of best practice approaches in the Chinese context
Technology support	The extent of instructional technology available is established (or lack thereof)
Communication with children	With interaction systems in place & improved familiarity with English proficiency amongst students, overall communication with students improved
Defeatist attitudes	Some children decide they can't succeed at English or don't see the rationale for learning it
Culture of competitiveness	Interns, while resistant to build on competitive nature of children, accept that leveraging childrens' "cultural propensity for winning" can be effective as a management tool
Time management	Interns develop an intuition regarding the time needed for individual components of their lesson
Flexibility in lesson delivery	Improved pedagogical risk-taking behaviors of interns; e.g. when teaching plan doesn't gel, interns demonstrate a willingness to consider multiple paths to continue
School routines	Interns come to understand predetermined recess & class change breaks, bell systems & eye/physical exercise designations; improved time management of intern in adapting to school system

Differentiated instruction	With a better understanding of the childrens' language proficiency & inherent culture of learning, lessons are better differentiated for all learners
Motivation	As the novelty of the "new" foreign teacher/pedagogy wears off, student motivation to learn wanes
Assessment pressures	Subjects other than English involve high-stakes testing of students; interns experience distracting behavior as students study/complete assignments during English class
Self-image	Acceptance that being a visitor, the interns' physical appearance is a novelty, but the resident fascination becomes irritating at times. Interns of a heavier set are subjected to inappropriate student comments.
Intern attitude	Rather than try to change the system in which they find themselves, they relax in the fact they are a country guest & do what they can to help children within the context of the Chinese system
Curriculum modification	Interns become comfortable in extending standard curriculum materials in creative ways
Language tools	More effective & diverse use of children's literature, poetry & popular media
Extracurricular influence	Increased interaction with Chinese culture outside of school influences the effective integration of socially important activities into lesson planning

*Table 3: The nature of the experience at the midpoint*

As teacher interns drew to the near conclusion of their China practicum, their experience could be described as per the coded trends in Table 4.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Anticipation	Mentally & physically preparing for return home distracted teaching
Remorse	Relationships with students coming to an end
Assessment pressures	Subjects other than English involve high-stakes testing of students; interns experience distracting behavior as students study/complete assignments during English class
Curriculum shift	Relaxed planning towards life skills for children rather than content building
Flexibility	Elevated comfort with curriculum, routines & developed systems promotes adaptability in classroom management & risk-taking lesson delivery
Confidence	Reaching teaching outcomes with minimal resources builds self-efficacy
Collaboration	Working with peer cohort & Chinese teachers has developed collaborative skills necessary for working effectively in schools
Cultural sensitivity	An inherent assurance built upon experience that the intern can adapt to cultural difference.

Sensitivity to learner	Interns much more adept at differentiating instruction
Tourism	With departure imminent, exploring culture a priority

*Table 4.* Themes evident in the closing month of teaching practice

Revisiting of these themes was corroborated via interview with the Foundations of Schooling instructor (after the course was completed to avoid conflict of interest) and through two independent focus groups with three and two interns respectively. Notes for these sessions were considered in an iterative fashion. Sporadic or outlier concepts were removed in an effort to capture consensus. From the interview field notes and transcriptions of focus groups, the ensuing conclusions were distilled.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

It is inherently understood that the narrative of ten teacher interns is expected to exhibit the nuances of participant difference in such things as cultural background, past exposure to children, predisposition to social interactions and travel experience. In addition, the nature of teaching loads would have varied across the intern cohort although distributed between grades one-six. So, while the research sought to build consensus by the very nature of coding of artefacts, it should be noted that this only represents a slice of the true and independent narrative of each intern. Nonetheless, in an action research framework, the feedback was useful in identifying how to move forward in terms of preparing interns for subsequent group experiences. It is also recognized that with a sample of 10 participants, that mixed-methods approaches to describing phenomena, needn't seek generalizability, but instead, describe the features of a unique system carefully enough that the reader can find themselves in the context; a certain verisimilitude (Guba, 1981). This is aptly contextualized by Beaulieu (2013).

Unlike other forms of interpretive research, action research is about seeking perspectives that are defined by the stakeholders, not by principal researchers, and it can involve exposing truths that are not guided by the myths of objectivity. For action researchers, seeking a singular truth or perspective is not necessarily a desirable goal. Instead, capturing the various stakeholder's perspectives can expose a broader view of the conditions that exist in a setting and offers opportunities for developing strategies that accommodate those different views. (p. 30)

### **Growth of Interns as They Adapt to the Setting**

Consider that the interns have studied at a small liberal arts institution (Acadia University) of approximately 3500 students in a rural agricultural town in Nova Scotia, Canada where the population would be predominantly of conservative second or third generation European descent. In being immersed in a drastically different living and teaching culture, interns are forced to change concepts on a host of fronts including, but not limited to, social, academic, habitual and pedagogical categories. The realities that constrain teacher development have been investigated with long term English as Foreign Language (hereafter, EFL) teachers in China. The researchers (Zhang, Yuan, & Wang, 2017) note that “the participants aspirations and commitments toward teaching were in tension with limited resources; institutionally, a democratic relationship was in tension with an authoritative leadership; emotionally, the teachers’ emotional wellbeing was in tension with contextual constraints” (p.1). Further, Cushner and Mahon (2002) posit that “because the overseas student teaching experience offers significant cross-cultural immersion, students are encouraged to stretch beyond their traditional zone of comfort” (p. 47). This is a positive process when we consider that real conceptual change associated with accommodating new knowledge requires disequilibrium (Golombek, &

Johnson, 2004; Piaget, 1977) and dissatisfaction with intrinsic mental dispositions or schema (Posner, Strike, Hewson & Gertzog, 1992; Schmidt, 2006). This movement away from simply assimilating new layers of understanding, particularly in the social realm, builds intercultural competency (Taylor, 1994) as they become what Cushner and Mahon (2002) call “effective cultural mediators”.

When considering the growth of interns as teachers, decontextualizing the experience by finding commonalities is arguably not helpful. The developmental narrative of each teacher intern has them challenging their own conception of teaching and learning, their “starting places” based on past experiences in parallel with the reality of how they were or were not prepared to teach on any given day (Olsen, 2002).

The tacit competency constructed through experience as a teacher is a complex blend of knowledge defined most aptly by Schulman (1987).

- -content knowledge;
- -general pedagogical knowledge, with special reference to those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter;
- curriculum knowledge, with particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers;
- pedagogical content knowledge, that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding;
- knowledge of learners and their characteristics;

- knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or the classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures; and
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds. (p. 8)

The importance of the context, in which content knowledge and pedagogy are situated, has been explored (MacKinnon, 2017; Schulman, 2006;). From a consideration of this synergy, the notion of signature pedagogies has emerged (Gurung, Chick, & Haynie, 2009). The central tenet of this concept suggests that subject areas have particular “habits of mind” or ways of teaching that are inextricably linked to the nature of the content knowledge. In this analysis we can understand that teaching English as a second language will have its own content and signature approaches (Golombek, 1998) but, overlapping that with the varied culture/predisposition of the learner would predictably have measurable influence.

### **Predispositions of Interns**

The work of Bennett (1993) is useful in understanding the influence of culture on interns and the ways in which their pedagogy develops. It suggests that the process of beginning to understand a culture, assists the person in taking on a broader perspective on world views. In the beginning of their international practicum, interns may assume what Bennett (1993) calls an “ethnocentric” stance that includes a continuum of denial (inability to see cultural difference)-defense (threatened by difference)-minimization (all cultures are the same). After significant immersion in the culture, Bennett (1993) suggests that the visitor may progress to an “ethnorelative” stance that includes a continuum of acceptance-adaptation-integration. In the interns’ narratives, it was clear that, with time spent in the system, but more importantly

exposure to culture outside the classroom, that lesson planning and delivery was both facile and more impactful. One might posit that this was directly related to their connectedness with the culture that frames the world of their students; an improved ability to situate learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) in more meaningful contexts.

The triangulated results of this work suggested that while interns were purposefully chosen to be: a) organized, b) responsible, c) professional and d) receptive to cultural difference, they differed in a final category. The focus groups were particularly poignant in identifying interns' predisposition as either "survivors" or "explorers". Maslow (1987) has suggested that all interns would have deficiency needs, i.e. basic physiological/psychological needs for adapting as they began their experience, and that one could not expect them to grow in substantive ways until those fundamental survivor instincts were met. All interns, by their perseverant nature, developed overtime a strong sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993); they all would portray characteristics as survivors at the onset. In the intern group, there were individuals that moved at a predictable pace that allowed them to begin exploring the awe and excitement of cultural difference (ethnorelative) by the midpoint of their four-month experience; this in turn improved their teaching. Other individuals were so self-absorbed (ethnocentric) in surviving in a foreign land; wanting to live the North American lifestyle halfway around the world, that this resistance kept them stalled so that their eventual movement to a semi-explorer mode came much later in their experience. It could be argued that for some interns, their intrinsic personality locked them in a survivor mode despite some signs that they were engaging culture in a substantive sincere capacity.

## Thematic Analysis

Tracking the continuum of shared experience admittedly doesn't necessarily capture the nuances of individual narratives (Clandinin, 2006). However, in an action research cycle that attempts to improve instruction, it has been useful to gather empirical materials (i.e. observational field notes, writing artefacts, interviews and focus groups) to build some consensus as to what modifications/supplements in preparatory instruction would assist interns about to embark on an international practicum placement. The independent consideration of each of three phases in the interns' four-month experience (i.e. beginning, midpoint, end) has been instrumental in identifying a range of needs. This longitudinal matrix has allowed a bridging of so-called "just in case" learning in favor of "just in time" learning (Halverson & Collins, 2009) as it provides snapshots along the way. Sampling of moments-in-time accesses unique needs of the intern that may be lost in requesting of interns an account of their cumulative experience.

The practicum experience, given its four-month duration, required that interns not just visit a new setting, but instead adapt to living in a fundamentally dissimilar teaching environment. As such, they were forced to accommodate within their schema and daily routine new ideas of pedagogy, lifestyle, relationships, political and social norms within a distinctly different communist society. These personal tensions are captured in a narrative of an EFL teacher in China (He & Lin, 2013) "we propose that English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher preparation is more than just a pedagogical or technological task but a task deeply infused with conflicting cultural and ideological beliefs and practices" (p. 205).

The recurring theme in responses to how best to prepare, was that interns wanted to hear more about the daily working lives of interns who had gone on previous practicum experiences. Said one intern "in listening to groups of past interns, I was able to situate my personality in one

of their reactions to the culture; how did the person (most like me) respond and adapt to all the changes?” With this in mind, the researcher will not only increase the number of preliminary interviews of past interns but also videotape those group sessions so that future interns have an abundance of first-hand reactions to the practicum experience.

### **Social Preparation**

Learning to teach is a socially mediated activity (Vygotsky, 1978) which is further complicated by relationship-building in a foreign culture. Interns found it disconcerting that culturally it seemed taboo for Chinese teachers to give them constructive criticism. As a result, the simplest of issues were not dealt with but instead came back through hierarchal channels that seemed to amplify the actual problem. As an example, an intern may use more student-centered approaches that the local teachers felt were unproductive in an assessment-driven system. The intern may only hear from the principal some months later that this was unacceptable or that their “writing was too messy” recounted one intern. It is difficult to change such cultural norms, but interns could be better prepared by emphasizing the importance of being proactive about establishing a teaching/learning community of sharing with Chinese teachers in their schools. This could be enhanced by the intern having a rudimentary but practical working knowledge of the Chinese language (Mandarin) such that teachers were not shy to interact with them.

### **Pedagogical Preparation**

Managing large classes is inextricably linked to teaching style (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Trevisan, & Brown, 2012).). While using a social-emotional climate approach to classroom management would have been preferred by many interns, the language barrier made this difficult to cultivate. The management choices of interns in this regard also hinged on what Chinese

students were accustomed to. In a most uncomfortable way, interns on occasion had to leverage a more authoritative approach to management because it was what students understood. The most successful interns however found that, using an instructional approach with multimodal activities and quick seamless transitions was most effective in managing distracting behaviors. These strategies included having multiple entry and exit points for the lesson as the intern attempted to differentiate the learning for the range of learning styles and competencies. This style of teaching can easily be prepared for prior to the practicum experience. A request of interns was that more lesson planning and delivery be practiced with real examples from the Chinese curriculum. This is somewhat complicated in that much Chinese curriculum in this ESL context is often presented as topics rather than learning outcomes. As relayed by one intern “at home interns need practice...they need to start from the curriculum topic and build the lesson around active learning that includes, music, games, and media to motivate the learner; having a variety of approaches and flexibility should keep management concerns at a minimum.”

Media has potential to enhance the learning of children in the digital age (Dede, 2005). The range of available technologies for these interns teaching in China was adequate but not always reliable in some schools. Interns suggested that advanced preparation to use instructional technology that is reliant only on simple office-type software, could be very helpful. They were in agreement that using technology to enhance learning was predicated on the fact that the pedagogy be inherently constructivist (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) to begin with. They recommended they required more advanced preparation in enhancing teaching with technology.

## **The Influence of Studying Educational Foundations as a Precursor**

### **The Instructor’s Perspective**

The instructor of the course felt that students, in addressing a summative assignment, were compelled to accommodate their new experiences in their prior knowledge of schooling. This assignment is described here (Shields, 2018).

The Summative assignment required an assimilation of their experiences and writing to create a concise beginning framework offering their current essential personal convictions and principles in education. Some students focused primarily on the characteristics of the Chinese educational system, but others blended their positions mindful of global generic characteristics, strategies and curriculum applied to all learners.

### **Reflections of the Interns**

Of the 10 interns, five offered written responses to the following three questions regarding the influence of their Foundations of Schooling course:

- 1) Did you feel the discussion of past educational ideologies impacted your open-mindedness with regard to the educational context in China? How so?
- 2) Did you feel the discussions (in Letters-to-Bob) positioned you to have a more educated critique of the China system? How so?
- 3) Did you feel the China experience rounded out your understanding of the range of educational approaches taken worldwide over the centuries? How so?

Interns were near unanimous in suggesting that they didn't realize the importance of considering what classroom teaching looked like as it related to the philosophy of education of the system. Said one student "while we talked about how the expectations of culture impacted the way people were past taught, the textbook examples could hardly compare to me trying to regroup in my own thinking as I began teaching in China." In particular, interns recounted direct conflict of the Chinese system with their Western experiences both as a student and as a teacher

in training. A representative comment was “my initial understanding of the traditional deductive approaches made me very critical of the Chinese system; in retrospect I may have missed a central goal of the Foundations course and that is to consider educational context.” Several interns noted inherent turmoil with the lack of child-centeredness and inclusive practice within the Chinese public-school system. In response to the questions posed regarding the Foundations course said one intern,

I think in the beginning I was quite judgmental...when I saw the way that assessment drove the pedagogy in the system, you know the importance of the Gaokao, I was quite dismayed, but you know I was looking through a Western lens. The letters we wrote were really all about what happens when my personal foundations interacted with a drastically different system and how I coped with that. I found it useful to write my thoughts in that informal way as it was near stream of consciousness...my internal conflict and survival as a teacher. In the end I came to appreciate the work ethic of the children. I believe the Foundations course gave me background to think about pedagogies but until I experience a distinctly different classroom as the teacher, I don't think I really got it; you know how the system and the culture shapes the teaching and learning.

The growth in intern's understanding of systemic pressures was evident in this response,

The course was great, it started me on a path of being understanding of difference, but our entire program taught us to value inclusive practice and differentiated instruction.

When you face a teaching situation where it is really difficult to invoke those ideas, then you realize you have to be patient and try to understand why things are the way they

are...then I reflected back on the course and what the prof was trying to get across - context is everything!

Another intern suggested “as a result of the course and the entire experience, I think I am more critical thinker, especially as a teacher”. When asked to elaborate, they framed critical thinking in much the same way as Brookhart (2010) in suggesting that they were more apt at “applying prudent or wise judgment to a situation” (p. 84).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Interns highlighted a number of preparatory activities, already in place, that they perceived were instrumental in their success in the practicum. The empirical research materials collected indicated the importance of the following as topics:

- developing interaction systems
- framing class time as a series of routines; establishing an agenda
- access and discussion of past lesson plans
- available instructional technologies
- expectations of the teaching; university and liaison company
- support systems in China
- professional behaviors and building relationships
- transportation systems, communication systems and monetary practicalities
- access to balanced diets
- health issue support
- practical packing for a four-month stay

The research described herein was designed to improve a system of practicum delivery that involves an international experience. By monitoring interns ongoing experience both individually and as a cohort, aspects of improvement could be identified. Because the interaction of individual intern with a new setting is bound to be distinctly unique, it is not assumed that all narratives would be identical. This work extends our understanding of the complexity of cultural integration as the intern navigates a different set of norms. We are nonetheless confident, that the triangulation of intern accounts, interviews and focus groups has been a productive means of focusing on areas of improvement in the preparation of interns for a practicum in China. The findings of this study poise the practicum designers to take action in responding to the range of stakeholder's concerns. The researchers will use the knowledge gained in this longitudinal study to inform the approach and content of future offerings of the preparatory phase for the China practicum.

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