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## Developing Culturally Competent Teachers: An International Student Teaching Field Experience

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## **Developing Culturally Competent Teachers: An International Student Teaching Field Experience**

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*Abstract: This study offers a theoretical construct for better understanding how experiential learning enables student teachers to acquire social and cultural variation skills, develop cultural empathy in the K-12 classroom, and the transference of these skills to new educational situations. An Australian and United States research team used a phenomenological approach to explore the connections between the skills student teachers acquire and the application of these newly developed skills to professional practices. Participants were a group of United States pre-teachers who enrolled in a 5 week teaching experience in Australia. Findings show that participation in cultural based events is part of a complex decision making process. The variety of cultures that now exist in schools requires new teachers to obtain and apply a skillset that promotes manoeuvrability through, and an understanding of the many definitions of culture. A better understanding of this process may strengthen curricula and improvements in teacher education program delivery and further enhance higher education study-abroad international partnerships.*

### **Introduction**

This study offers a theoretical construct for better understanding how experiential learning enables student teachers to acquire social and cultural variation skills, develop cultural empathy in the K-12 classroom, and the transference of these skills to new educational situations. Practical application is woven into the study through the analysis of the experience of student teachers from a United States university into local schools in an Australian community. The application of cultural skills draws upon prior university training models which incorporate a cultural competency component. As was the case in this study, such components are commonly incorporated into international study-abroad programs. By examining the relationships of intended program outcomes of skills acquisition with intended professional practices we may be able to more effectively promote cultural skills competency.

## The Experience of Teaching Abroad

In both the United States and Australia, university teacher education programs are increasingly responding to state and national initiatives which promote the adoption of uniform standards for the transformation of student teacher training and program development (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hannaway & Baker, 2009; Shepard, Loeb, Rouse & Shorris, 2007; Zeichner, 2010). Among the key elements identified as important for future teachers is the development of greater cultural competence. The United States National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, for example, has drawn attention to the critical importance of arming teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills to meet the globally shifting demands resulting from the increasing cultural diversity of students (Hamsa, 1998). In support of improving teacher preparation programs to this end, Gay (2002) has shown that, “explicit knowledge about cultural diversity is imperative to meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students” (p.107) while in a recent study Siwatu (2011) has called for “incorporate[ing] self-efficacy-building activities in the preparation of culturally responsive teachers” (p.368). Despite studies such as these, understanding how to make effective changes to programs specifically addressing cross cultural effects, and to promote application of new skillsets learned, continues to present a challenge for most teacher education programs (Siwatu, 2007; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

This study provides a theoretical construct on which to build programs that address teacher understanding of cross-cultural effects in learning in ways that will encourage the use of the learning in professional teaching practice. In proposing the model, the study discusses the experiences of a group of ten students from the United States while engaging in a pre-service teaching experience abroad in Australia. These students, all female, were nearing the end of their teacher education program and had completed at least ten weeks of pre-service teaching experience in the United States. Discussion of the experiences of this group is based upon a phenomenological investigation that seeks to understand the meaning that the students made out of their experiences teaching in a different cultural environment. The teaching abroad program in Australia involved a week of orientation and a further four weeks comprised mostly team teaching. The experiences of this group demonstrate that by crossing cultural boundaries student teachers are exposed to significant learning opportunities. In addition to the cross-cultural experience, phenomena such as social class boundaries become more transparent in a study-abroad setting as student teachers encounter first-hand the challenges diverse student populations must contend with.

In interpreting the experiences identified, the research team developed a theoretical framework that extends Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT). The framework has value in interpreting how these students acquired and applied social and cultural variation skills during teaching experience, and also provides valuable insights for teacher education curricula reforms which promote professional transformation. Following the description of the proposed extensions to ELT, this study includes a detailed account of the phenomenological methods followed by a discussion of the study findings through a theoretical framework. The study concludes with recommendations for the use of the framework in curriculum reform in teacher education.

## Theoretical Framework

Research has shown that students gain an enhanced ability to perceive and identify aspects of culture when immersed in a foreign country setting, yet, the acquisition of specific skills and how emerging professionals transform practice have not been clearly addressed in the literature (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Edmonds, 2010). The study that follows was designed to expressly investigate how student teachers identify and engage with cultural differences when studying abroad, and how they develop cultural competence in that setting. In the study the concept of cultural competence is applied broadly as an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills which enhance professional interaction in cross-cultural situations.

Professional learning requires the complex task of transforming acquired knowledge into applied knowledge. To better understand how the participants in this study were making this transformation a theoretical model of learning was developed to better understand the cross-cultural experience. As shown in Figure 1, the model drew upon the experiential learning theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) and was supported by the foundational work of Mezirow (1981, 1991, 1994) and Vygotsky (1930-1934/1978).



**Figure 1: Theoretical Foundation for Study Design**

Within experiential learning theory, Kolb (1984) addresses four dynamic stages of learning: accommodative, diverging, assimilating, and convergent. Each stage requires the implementation of specific learning strategies for learning and application to take place over the lifetime of the learner. While ELT suggests that learner's continuously transition from one learning phase into another as a result of life experiences, it provides little detail on how the learning from life experiences is transformed into changes in (professional) practice or what causes convergence. Kolb & Kolb (2005) argue that learners teeter between abstract conceptualization and active experimentation when faced with unfamiliar situations. As is evident in this study, however, participants will only experiment with their actions when a specific 'trigger point' is engaged; otherwise, regardless of the participants level of content knowledge, the perceived risks within a situation may appear too great to take action.

To extend the interpretive power of ELT, we propose that the trigger points for engagement can be located both internally to the participant through the incorporation of

elements of transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1994; Baumgartner, 2001, Taylor, 2008), and externally to the participant through the inclusion of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978). By extending ELT in this way, we contend that learners find equilibrium between thought and action based upon the types of knowledge and praxis acquired from student teaching experiences, and that the balance participants strive to attain between internal and external influences of knowledge during lived experiences lead to physical action or inaction.

Transformational learning theory argues that internal influences including beliefs, feelings, and values impact upon a learner's world-view through a reflective process. This process describes the paradigm shift leading to the knowledge-application transfer observed in some adult learners. Comprised of 10 phase shifts, transformational learning theory posits four main elements: 1) elaboration of existing frames of references, 2) learning new frames of reference, 3) transforming habits of mind, and 4) transforming points of view (Mezirow, 1981, 1994; Kitchenham, 2008). As adult learners progress through each phase, the theory suggests that foundational knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs may also change (Mezirow, 1994). This theoretical basis for 'reflective' practice has been widely adopted within teacher education. Given the progressive demands for knowledge-application transfer required by the adult learner, however, only a small number of learners experience transformational change, of which, an even smaller number are able to apply learning to new contexts.

Lesser known are holistic approaches to understand the transformational learning process. Baumgartner (2001) and Taylor (2008), for example, while agreeing with Mezirow's (1991) concept of disoriented dilemma, argue that individuals reach new conclusions through a culmination of events rather than a single identifiable event. Such conclusions have led to an increasing interest within university teacher education programs in the integration of experiential and service learning. Current research suggests there is more to these types of learning opportunities, however, than a pragmatic, reflective involvement of students (Pearson & Somekh, 2006; Stam, Miedema, Onstenk, Wardekker, & Dam, 2013). Reflection on internal elements is important for applied learning, but so too is the context of learning.

The theory of socio-cultural development provides an approach that acknowledges the contextual components of an experience by exploring the synthesis of culture and environment, which then lead to the application of knowledge, skills and abilities. First introduced by Vygotsky (1930-1934/1978), the theory identifies the role of culture and learning in context as part of a student's cognitive development. Asserting that knowledgeable mentors provide scaffolding, this theory states that a student's values, feelings, and beliefs are challenged throughout the learning process (Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978). As an individual's world view begins to change, a skillset for application within the new setting develops; an intellectual adaptation process occurs. While there is no doubt that in-context learning experiences promote transformational learning in adults (Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978), determining exactly what skills are acquired, to what extent, and when learning transforms into application is not fully understood.

Both transformational and socio-cultural learning theories are often deployed to explain experiential learning such as that which occurs in teacher education programs. Deployed independently, each theory has significant weaknesses. Deployed together, however, these theories provide a strong framework for understanding what triggers learners to move from accommodating, to diverging, to assimilating, and to finally converging on new practice.

## Study Design

The focus of this qualitative study is to better understand and describe how a group of student teachers perceive elements of acculturation, transference into a cultural skillset, and later application of this skillset into professional practice. A phenomenological approach was used within this study emphasizing the individual meaning of the lived experience. In this context the study-abroad student teachers provided a means to observe experiential learning theory in practice. This perspective of the student teachers provided insights into their knowledge, skills, and abilities (elements of socio-cultural development) and their beliefs, feelings, and values (elements of transformational learning) as they encountered unfamiliar situations. Vygotsky (1930-1934/1978) states that culture is a key factor in the social development of individuals, with the application of skills dependent upon an individual's drive to fit in with others. Phenomenology attempts to capture these involvements with others, as participants make meaning from the lived experience.

Phenomenology is generally seen as a study of everyday experiences and the process whereby meaning is constructed from shared lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Crotty, 1998). Patton (2015) describes this phenomenological process as requiring the "...capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (p. 115). When used as a basis for this study, the strength of the phenomenological approach, "lies in its capacity to provide insights, rich details, and thick descriptions" (Jack & Anderson, 2002, p. 473). These rich details and descriptions assist in identifying and linking abstract conceptualization to active experimentation providing context when learners face unfamiliar situations. Within this study, the lived experiences were gathered from focus groups, interviews, observations, and a wide range of documents and social media in the attempt to find shared meanings across individuals and concepts. Commonalities were explored using thematic analysis of data as a way to link diverse experiences together (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Within the context of study-abroad, the essence of a student teachers involvement is focused on acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities (elements of socio-cultural development) in addition to the beliefs, feelings, and values (elements of transformational learning) that drive students to action or inaction. This study places an emphasis on the individual meaning and subsequent application of the lived experience for student teachers abroad.

## Research Team

Patton has noted that because "the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry" the researcher should disclose their experience, training, and perspective that they bring to the project (Patton, 2015, p. 700). The research team in this study drew upon their knowledge and experiences in K-12 education in both the United States and Australia. These educational experiences allowed the research team to gather information from the perspective of a teacher education supervisor, with a focus on what student teachers need to model when entering culturally diverse classrooms. The prior educational experiences of the research team allowed a profession specific focus to be maintained when generating meaning and drawing from the observations collected (Manen, 1997). In addition, the research team drew upon a wide range of career experiences in higher education, school leadership and teacher education. The team

acknowledged that teaching is no longer seen as the simple presentation of information with the hope that students will absorb knowledge. Rather, the team shared an understanding that today's teacher must make learning personal, and meaningful, where relationship building promotes the application of knowledge to a student's everyday life.

## Research Questions

The following inter-related research questions framed the scope of the inquiry and assisted the research team in maintaining clear boundaries during the implementation of the study. The questions were used to systematically guide the inquiry during iterative stages of analysis of data and development of findings.

1. How do student teachers perceive the experience?
2. How do international students experience learning in an international (non native culture) experience?
3. How do student teachers change in such an experience?

## Participants

This study drew participants from a mid-western university in the United States, where the student teaching program incorporates a cultural competency component. Participants for this study were chosen using purposive sampling. As part of a comprehensive review process, overall grade point average, completion of coursework, and an admissions process through the teacher education department was required of all student teachers for admission.

Criterion sampling was used in this study to identify the participants who were enrolled as student teachers in the final semester of undergraduate studies. Admission into this study-abroad experience included a review of overall grade point average, completion of coursework and a state recognized admissions process directed by a university teacher education program. The student teachers volunteered to participate in the international student teaching component during the last five weeks of the semester. To be considered for the international student teaching experience, these participants were required to successfully complete 10 weeks of student teaching within the continental United States prior to international field experience placement. While in Australia the student teachers were supervised and provided support by a faculty member from a United States university, and additional support received through an Australian teacher education university partnership program.

A core group of 10, self-identified female student teachers participated within the Australian student teaching abroad experience. The majority of these students were traditional students (ages 21-24) with the exception of one student who was 29 years old. Four of the students in this group were elementary education majors, three were special needs instructors, and three were secondary education majors. All of the students were in their last semester of coursework before teacher certification. Most had little or no experience traveling outside of their home state and none had travelled abroad prior to this experience. One student self-identified as Asian-American, one African-American, and the remaining eight identified themselves as Caucasian.

## Setting

The study-abroad program involved a partnership between an Australian university and a mid-western university in the United States. Student teachers from the United States university were placed in K-12 classrooms in four different schools in the community. The Australian university provided placement assistance and recruited classroom supervising teachers. Upon arrival in Australia the student teachers received a week of orientation training which was held at the Australian university. During this time the student teachers were introduced to their Australian 'buddy', a student teacher at a similar stage of teacher training as the United States student teacher. Housing and meals were arranged for the United States student teachers at a residence hall facility which was a short distance from the Australian university campus. Public bus transportation was available at the residence hall with connections to the host university campus and area K-12 schools.

## Data Gathering

Participants' shared their concerns and priorities for teaching abroad during the selection process. Each student teacher participated in an informal pre-departure conversational interview at a local coffee shop. During the pre-departure interview several of the student teachers stated that they felt this opportunity would make them more employable in a difficult economy.

Student teacher participants initially contacted via e-mail, were introduced to the research team. The purpose of the research, along with the benefits and risks of this study were addressed, after which, each student teacher agreed to participate in the study. All of the student teachers participated in one 30-minute pre-departure individual interview, a one hour mid-experience focus group, numerous individual discussions, e-mail, instant messaging, and Facebook correspondences, and a 45-minute post-experience focus group. Supporting data were also collected from a variety of venues (as listed in Table 1) such as online journals/blogs, observations, Wikispaces, photos, and informal conversations to support each of the students' experiences. This variety of data provided a rich collection of perspectives to supplement research team field observations. In addition, data were gathered using behavioural observations obtained during visits to host classrooms, interview sessions, and while traveling and living together during a 15 day period.

The large number of data sources strengthened data triangulation within the study, thus enhancing the credibility of analyses. By combining each of these data sources, a conceptual context was created, allowing rich meaning from human interaction to be derived.



<b>Facebook/instant messaging</b>	While living in a residence hall multi-level building, the student teachers preferred to Instant Message every day on Facebook rather than chat face-to-face. We created a private Facebook page to keep each other abreast of the programs offered locally, project timelines and expectations, and location links others had visited. As the group divided into subgroups, each went their own direction to explore. Facebook was the platform where discussion could take place among groups. <i>(10 individual &amp; 1 group account)</i>
<b>Wikispaces</b>	The student teachers created a Wikispaces website that included guidelines, lesson plans and a student teaching in Australia survival guide. <i>(Online portfolio: 10 accounts addressing 7 teaching standards)</i>
<b>Mahara</b>	Online portfolios <i>(10 accounts aligned to 7 teaching standards)</i>
<b>Photos</b>	The student teachers posted online photos. Several students created digital memory books. <i>(~500 photos)</i>
<b>Student E-mail correspondence</b>	At first the e-mail correspondence was sporadic and professional; as the students became familiar with their new environment; their email correspondence style became less formal. <i>(45 threads)</i>
<b>Documents &amp; Artefacts</b>	Documentation was gathered from the teacher education departments and the university office of international education. Event brochures were downloaded for activities in Australia.
<b>Interviews</b>	Two formal focus groups were held with the student teachers on the areas of knowledge, skills and abilities when dealing with everyday situations and differences experienced within the classroom. <i>(10 semi-structured 1:1 interviews)</i>
<b>Conversations</b>	Informal group and personal conversations were held to discuss topics of interest. This time of reflection allowed student teachers to address their successes and challenges.
<b>Observations</b>	Researcher observations made while living with and participating in activities with student teachers. Field notes were written daily to chronicle events that occurred. <i>(~ 32 typed pages)</i>

**Table 1: Data Sources**

## Data Analysis Process

Analysis drew upon the lived experiences of the students which were gathered from a large variety of sources in an attempt to identify shared meanings across individuals and concepts. Commonalities were explored by the authors using thematic analysis of data as a way to link diverse experiences (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Using the resulting evidence the research team explored the acquisition and application of cultural competencies through students' behaviour or their willingness to apply (or not apply) learned skills. The focus of the study considered the connections between transformational change and the ability to apply cultural techniques in the classroom. This approach incorporated "reflection, negotiation, decision making, knowledge creation, individual participation and power dynamics" (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998, p. 9). The process allowed students, teachers, and facilitators to derive "action-oriented knowledge about [the participants'] reality, clarifying and articulating their norms and values to reach a consensus about further action" (Brunner & Guzman, 1989, p.11).

A wide variety and quantity of data were gathered to increase the empirical quality and trustworthiness of this study. Additionally, by employing ethical standards, integrating prolonged engagement in the field, member checking, and purposive sampling, throughout the data gathering process, credibility was achieved in the final examination of data. Analysis followed an ongoing process suggested by Eisenhart and Howe (1992) that begins with the design of the study and ensures a "fit between the research question, data gathering procedures, and analytic techniques" (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). In addition, analysis involved the application of a situational learning perspective to explore the impact of various settings of teacher learning and the acquisition and application of different kinds of knowledge.

During the data analysis, patterns and trends were considered using a qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo 10. Working with data using a qualitative data analysis software program allows the researcher to scrutinize for context and meaning and allows patterns or clusters to emerge providing the researcher with insight into the deeper meaning that exists within the data (Kaczynski, Salmons, & Smith, 2014). The data analysis followed a sequence of reading, highlighting, interpreting, and ordering information as patterns emerged and were noted. This is the inductive process as described by Guba & Lincoln (1985) which uses a repetitive approach where topics are highlighted, combined and data are re-reviewed. According to Moustakas (1994) to effectively accomplish this, data protocols must be divided into segments from which clusters of meaning can be derived. The lived experiences, defined by a phenomenological study, became the general descriptions central to understanding the meaning within the content. In this case, both the lived and the interpreted experiences emerged from the variety of data sources as viewed by the team of researchers providing depth and corroboration to the analysis. The summation of data for credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, provided trustworthiness to the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Critical analysis of the data from multiple perspectives, including discrepant explanations were incorporated along with ongoing member checks with the student teachers. The use of a single analysis or perspective was overcome by integrating multiple techniques with a variety of data sources (Patton, 2015). Data triangulation methods were employed with the understanding that differentiation among a variety of data sources adds to the credibility of the study. This was accomplished by reviewing data for patterns and re-reviewing the variety of data sources for similar trends to be further developed in future research. Interpretive discussions among the research team further enhanced the analysis process. By using several triangulation methods of

analysis, the themes that emerged from the data provided a deeper perspective with greater confidence.

## Findings & Discussion

### Finding 1

Personal boundaries define the space an individual is comfortable within. By moving outside a comfort zone and crossing cultural boundaries student teachers are provided learning opportunities of a lifetime. Personal boundaries create and are created by a particular perception of self (the beliefs, feelings, and values) that in this study were seen to drive how a student participated, or chooses not to participate, in the unfamiliar culture. This group of American student teachers appeared to maintain relatively small personal boundaries and were often moved outside of their comfort zone. This may have been driven by the fact that none of them had previously travelled abroad, and it clearly signalled an egocentric view of the world. While each of these student teachers learned about diversity in their coursework, it was clear that actually experiencing the minority perspective was a challenge to personal boundaries.

A notable theme within this finding was that the phenomenon of social class boundaries became more transparent in the study-abroad setting. The familiarity of class-based power structures tend to become invisible through social interactions in one's normal lived experience. The student teachers, however, experienced a different cultural setting with different ways of 'doing' class. Through this reflective experience the student teachers became more aware of the challenges faced by others in both the United States and Australia.

*For me I was able to see just how much the world is connected. In our country's past we have issues with racism and diversity acceptance. They have the same thing over there. You can see it through the art work especially. It's interesting to see how much we are all really connected even though we are 9,000 miles away. [student teacher #2]*

A heightened sense of social interconnectedness was acknowledged by the student teachers as they explored unfamiliar social class structures.

The observations of the challenges faced by different student populations were heightened by the student teachers' own first-hand experiences of feeling out of place, observed and lacking insider knowledge. These challenges included language and the inability to accomplish daily activities. Although the student teachers from the U.S. appeared visibly the same as the majority population in Australia, shared the same dominant language of English with only small differences in usage, and shared a broad cultural heritage as Anglo-settler societies, the student teachers' perception of themselves became a limiting factor in their willingness to participate publically in activities. As student teacher #5 stated, "I feel like people are always looking at me" while many bought new clothes in an attempt to not stand out. This perception of personal boundary did not change even when student teachers realized and acknowledged that they did not stand out of the crowd as much as they thought they had. The student teachers continued to maintain their distance from the local population because of differences in language and social mannerisms.

Difficulty in understanding nuances in the Australian language and pronunciation of words made the student teachers feel vulnerable. They realized that by speaking aloud, they

were unable to hide the fact that they were foreign visitors. As one of the student teachers explained;

*I think there was a real vulnerability to content, anytime we opened our mouths it was over. They knew where we were from and we were out of our element. We were subjected to however they felt about North America and if there was going to be a prejudice, there was going to be anything negative associated with that, I think there was an interesting and new vulnerability I never felt before and a desire for me to prove that anything they had thought, anything they had heard was wrong. [student teacher #4]*

The student teachers' personal boundaries were challenged by this experience of being identified with something negative (US culture which they perceived to be held in contempt in the Australian setting) and found it difficult to act because of the challenge. This led to real limits, for example, on engaging in non-work specific conversation with teachers in their schools.

Daily activities also posed a serious challenge for many student teachers within the group. The student teachers were required to take public transportation. Although this requirement was intended to accelerate acculturation and promote independence, the majority of the student teachers found this uncomfortable and considered it to be a formidable challenge. Because none within the group had experience using public transportation, understanding the nuances that accompany forming a queue (line), bus schedules, weekend and weekday time tables, bus stops, passes and riding etiquette was too much for several within the group. Student teachers over the first few weeks spent hours looking over bus schedules, planning trips, traveling together as groups, and learning how to get to required destinations. Several became overwhelmed with the inconsistency of the bus timetable, or stops that were not marked on the route. When asked their preference of travel as a group or going alone, the student teachers were unanimous in support for group travel.

*I was paranoid on the bus. What if we don't make our stop? With being with the group, having someone say, we are here, I'm like, okay we can make it somewhere and having that reassurance was good. Now, I feel comfortable to go out on my own and go take a bus and find my way back, but at the beginning I never would have made it on my own, ever, from that aspect of it. [student teacher #3]*

Several student teachers remained uncomfortable using public transportation throughout their stay in Australia. They would not engage in individualized free-time events if travel involved the use of public transportation. They would also refuse to participate in group after-hours social events due to the fear they may miss the last bus.

Within the theoretical framework proposed in this paper, this disengagement from the local culture through self-imposed limits to conversation or transportation can be interpreted as an inability to internally process and externally act if the required cultural capital does not exist or has not fully developed into a usable skillset. Social development theory suggests that individuals introspectively develop from cultural experiences in context. Within ELT this aspect of the divergent learning style suggests that these daily experiences encourage student teachers to synthesize and actively experiment with information derived from the acculturation process. Active experimentation leads to concrete experiences as students within the accommodative learning style are faced with the choice to participate or not participate. These choices however, are based upon how the individual understands a situation, their ability to internalize the possible risks (abstract conceptualization), and the actions they decide to take as a result.

Socio-cultural development theory considers scaffolding within these situations as imperative. Although the time honoured "sink or swim" attitude is still maintained within many

study-abroad programs, directed scaffolding may assist students with underdeveloped skillsets. Effective scaffolding, however, requires a shift from standardized group support to program delivery which is designed to respond to individualized learning needs. Organizational commitment to scaffolding learning support must be integrated early into a teacher education program curriculum and extend to the delivery of the study-abroad experience. As was the case with the challenge of public transportation, program group support was provided. Student teachers were issued pre-paid student bus passes and provided orientation training including a group orientation bus trip. In addition, student teachers were matched with an Australian student teacher buddy from the partnership university. Since the buddies owned personal cars the student teachers tended to use the buddies solely as a means for private vehicle transportation. From the findings, individualized scaffolding is recognized as an essential ingredient to overcoming the perceptions of personal boundaries. Knowing how to implement scaffolding in an effective manner however remains unclear from this study.

In terms of the learning theory outlined in this paper, a contention of Finding 1 is that the relative cultural similarity actually created a greater dissonance than an experience involving larger cultural differences. In questioning the depth of learning of students in their study, Mwabi and Brigham (2009) suggest that students may have been able to accommodate their experience within their existing conceptual frameworks and not experienced significant divergence. The students in this study, however, were not able to assign their difficulties to extreme difference in social structure, or to language, or to poverty. The difficulties they experienced arose due to 'not quite' knowing how things worked in the new context, and not yet having the cultural skills or the personal confidence to find out.

This is an important finding for teacher education. Decentring a eurocentric perspective is probably beyond the capacity of teacher education in most circumstances. Providing experiences that challenge the personal boundaries of students in a more limited way, however, may be a more effective educational strategy. The students within this study were required to, and were largely able to, develop strategies for acquiring the knowledge needed to work as effective teachers within the different cultural context. So much so, that six of the student teachers were offered full-time teaching positions in Australia upon completion of student teaching and graduation.

The implication of this finding is that consideration should be given when designing placements abroad to the provision of positive experiences that students in traversing each of the learning styles defined within ELT without the vulnerability that holds them back. Such scaffolding will result in students becoming more culturally confident in their abilities to *fit into* social contexts.

## **Finding 2**

A second finding of this study is that the student teachers found it difficult to accurately interpret behaviours in the culturally different setting. It was notable that the students had difficulty in both interpreting how members of the local culture perceived them, and in interpreting the behaviours of members of the local culture. The student teachers expressed self-conscious perceptions about how they were perceived and accepted by the people of the local culture and also anxiety about meeting the expectations of locals (self-efficacy/perception). In

this regard, interaction was stifled (anxiety over acceptance, vulnerability) and impeded the student teachers cultural transference to professional practices.

As seen in the discussion of language and accent in the first finding, students perceived they were vulnerable despite no real evidence of threat. In this sense, how a student feels others perceive them within a culture influenced how they outwardly behaved. The same held true for dress and mannerisms. Although the student teachers did not perceivably dress differently from the local population, all of the students felt they stood out and were stared at because of the way they dressed. This perceived perspective prompted some students to go shopping to purchase local clothing in an attempt to fit in. Field observations indicated that locals looked at the group because the students travelled all together as a large pack, specifically during the first few weeks of the visit. There was no noticeable reaction to modes of dress which were within the normal variation found in the location. While imagined, the idea of not fitting in socially was one that many of the students had never experienced and felt very uncomfortable with.

The interpretation of local behaviours was also difficult. The mannerisms of the Australian people in social contexts, for example, were different from what the student teachers expected. Queues (lines) at the bus stops, in shopping malls, and at various social venues all required what appeared to be insider knowledge, which these student teachers did not have. While some students within the group saw these differences for what they were, others became overwhelmed and began to impose self-made or imagined rules or accepted behaviours upon themselves and the group. In field observations it was seen that to overcome this deficit, some student teachers held back from group activity to observe the mannerisms or protocol for various situations before deciding to participate. Others fell into sub-groups where the leader provided the support they needed to understand the situation. Within the first eight days, the group of students broke into several sub-groups, with each of the smaller groups lead by an individual who maintained the most social capital or cultural curiosity.

The interpretation of behaviours and perceptions created challenges in the professional learning environment of the school classroom. Within the classrooms in which they worked, student teachers reported the perception of themselves as the outsider. Many reported frustration with the unwritten rules and cultural expectations that they were not able to figure out. Several student teachers stated that the students and teachers knowingly let them flounder as if there was an entertainment value attached to their struggles. Their inability to understand the expectations of supervising teachers, many of the terms used within coursework, the cultural norms between home and school, and specifically the nuances of the teachers' conference (staff) room, made many of the student teachers feel uncomfortable. Although each participant successfully completed 10 weeks of student teaching in the U.S., the knowledge they acquired was not easily translated into this new culture. Once internalized, the individual must externally act (or choose not to act); this fine line is where transformational understanding may occur. As one student teacher explained;

*I think it's reminded me to remember that not everyone knows or has experience with the same things that I do. Don't just assume that they will know what you are talking about or what is customary in a situation. [student teacher #9]*

Of note for teacher education programs here is that the teacher education program had promoted the idea that the students were ambassadors for their American university. The student teachers took this obligation seriously and many developed strong strategies such as checking understandings with the staff of the Australian university. Others, however, found the role of ambassador to be a burden in learning.

A most positive finding for teacher education is that after a few weeks of struggling to interpret local behaviours, the students began to empathize with others they encountered experiencing an unfamiliar situation. For example, several student teachers helped some travellers who were having obvious difficulties at the bus stop and offered assistance in reading the time table. In the professional learning situation the student teachers became acutely aware of the students in their classes who were struggling and expressed the need to figure out why particular students struggled, and to help these students through their personal challenge. By using an approach that included empathy, the student teachers created professional relationships with both the students and teachers in their host school that ran deeper than the ones created in their first ten weeks of student teaching in the United States.

*What I keep telling people when I come back here [United States], one thing I really realize, over there [Australia] they appreciate and they value and respect teachers. I think, way more than they do here. Over there when we would say we were studying to be teachers, they would say "Oh that's great and I want to hear all about it, that's so cool." Here you tell them you want to be a teacher and they are like "Why? How are you going to get a job? Do you think you're going to get a job? Are you going to move away?" It's like 20 questions about how terrible your decision is. Thanks, because I'm about to graduate in four days. [student teacher #6]*

With time, the student teachers were able to extend beyond current practices as they effectively explored the nuances of relationships based in culture. Translating into other areas of learning and program development, information gathered from this study provides an understanding of how and when students act within uncomfortable cultural situations. As a result, six of the 10 student teachers were offered full-time teaching positions in Australia, of which, two accepted positions and currently live in Australia.

This experiential learning about perceptions is potentially valuable. It is notable that in the early period of dissonance, the students gained an empathetic experience of life for students from non-dominant cultures in schools. In any social situation there are actors who understand the codes and rules for participating in that situation and there may be others who do not and lack the *habitus* or disposition to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1998). People in possession of the knowledge of the codes and rules of the social setting are often unaware of the existence of such rules which may result in a tendency to blame those who don't have this knowledge for their own 'failings' (Ochoa, 2007). As successful students about to graduate with a degree, the students in this study were used to understanding the 'rules of the game' in educational settings. This understanding was challenged in their teaching within Australia and in facing this challenge they reported feeling the subject of scrutiny and even ridicule.

The ineffectiveness of a 'buddy' system established in the experience to assist with insider knowledge is instructive. In the program under study, the American students were paired with an Australian buddy who was also a teacher education student and could act as a peer-mentor to assist navigating the differences in cultural and organizational terrain. In a number of cases, however, the students subverted this assistance. When faced with the difficulties of public transport, for example, the students did not use their buddies to expand their understanding but rather talked them into providing car rides. This was certainly not the intention. Although this provides an empathetic opportunity to understand how students from a non-dominant cultural position are likely to choose solutions that solve their immediate discomfort rather than the often more difficult option of learning new cultural rules, it did not provide effective experiential learning.

Social development theory suggests that individuals introspectively develop from cultural experiences in context. As student teachers are encouraged to synthesize and apply information derived from the acculturation process, they are faced with the choice to participate or not participate. These choices are, however, based upon how the individual understands a situation, their ability to internalize the possible risks, and the actions they take as a result. While this appears to be a simple process, this study finds that a person's decision to refrain from participation in cultural based events is part of a complex decision making process that is just as important as their decision to participate. Designing programs with these concepts in mind promotes student teacher action within the perceived vulnerable situations they will face in diverse classrooms. In addition, student teacher insights from individual meaning of the lived experience provide teacher education learning experiences that transform classroom practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000). The information collected from this study provides meaningful structure to teacher education program development which, in turn, promotes the desirable broader goal of transforming current classroom practices.

### **Conclusion: Advancing Theory into Practice**

While a pragmatic approach to cultural competence is an expectation of all teachers, many find this challenge unattainable in an atmosphere of test-driven accountability (Zhao, 2010). As a result, new teachers, pressed with the challenges of standards-based education, revert to a cultural lens they find familiar—their own. Many students face an academic deficit as they try to learn both the content and the expected culture to meet any unfamiliar expectations of the mentor teacher (Delpit, 2006).

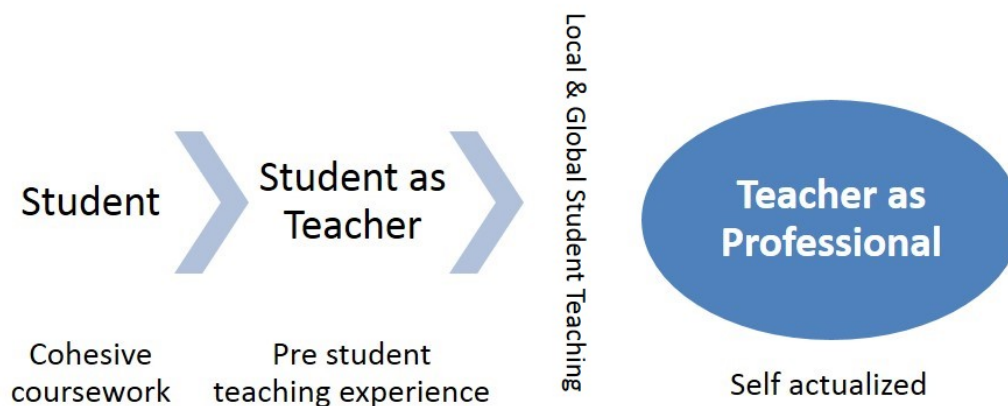
Lacking foundational knowledge of culture, most student teachers only obtain a regionally-centred teaching experience that tends to be ethnocentric when teaching in classrooms of their own. Challenged further, new teachers face an expanding definition of culture, which now includes economic, social, and technological variance among populations (Miller, 1958; Parrish, & Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010). This evolution in the definition of culture is in response to the significant population changes that have taken place over the past decade in many developed countries. The variety of cultures that now exist in schools requires new teachers to obtain and apply a skillset that promotes manoeuvrability through, and an understanding of the many definitions of culture. Although most student teachers are exposed to coursework that addresses learning from a cultural perspective, many are unable to apply these skills to the K-12 classroom. Fewer still are the number of teachers able to enter and maintain successful careers within an international market in search of teaching positions abroad.

The ability of teachers to move beyond local expectations, address academic gaps, and meet future global demands, requires directed acculturation experiences. These experiences provide the foundation needed by novice teachers as they enter an increasingly complex and challenging profession (NCTAF, 2007). Teacher education coursework often lacks consistent cultural elements to build an applied curriculum upon (Hewitt, 2006; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Beutel, 2010). Assumed to be a part of the higher education curricula for student teachers, socio-cultural competency, and its applications are currently an overlooked component requiring further development. Current efforts to close the academic gaps that exist between diverse student groups require today's teachers to become multi-culturally literate. Yet, assumptions exist that student teachers who obtain these skills are also willing and able to apply them within



the classroom. Although the acquisition of cultural competency skills continues to be the focus of many teacher education programs, a contention of this study is that practices must shift to include the application of skills within the classroom ensuring that all students benefit from inclusive instruction.

This study extends the discussion of student teacher preparation beyond the traditional methods of teacher education coursework and field-based classroom experiences in local school settings. The challenge of supporting cultural competency skills acquisition becomes one of promoting meaningful recognition and reflection upon issues of culture, social class, and poverty. A key implication from a recent study by Siwatu (2011) calls for “incorporate[ing] self-efficacy-building activities in the preparation of culturally responsive teachers” (p.368). As discussed in this study, organizational commitment promoting cultural competency skills acquisition must be integrated early into a teacher education program curriculum and extended to a meaningful capstone application during the delivery of the study-abroad experience, see Figure 2 below. This study demonstrates that a comprehensive restructuring of teacher education which embeds cultural competency skills training throughout a multiyear program would also benefit from a concurrent embedding of directed scaffolding. Student teachers engaged in an international field experience have a unique opportunity to accelerate their professional development as they transform from student to student as teacher and ultimately to teacher as professional. University programs seeking to maximize this development, however, must find ways to appropriately support both transformational and socio-cultural learning. For example, the roles of counsellor, den mother and supported living coach may provide critically needed scaffolding as student teachers overcome personal boundaries during an accelerated transformation.



**Figure 2: Organizational Support for Socio-Cultural Curricula Reform**

Not only must future professionals engage in risk taking as they gauge their degree of participation in unfamiliar cultures, but university programs must engage in risk taking when building global partnerships. Private foundations often adopt joint funding for programs to

strengthen stakeholder engagement and to share the financial risk. Such partnerships also promote a beneficial sharing of resources and increase the potential for success. Global university partnerships promoting international student teacher field experience programs should consider adopting a larger partnership strategy.

A broader contribution from this study relates to state and national policy reforms in the United States which have increased attention to uniform standards supporting the ongoing calls for the transformation of student teacher training (Shepard, Hannaway, & Baker, 2009; Loeb, Rouse, & Shorris, 2007). This study identified similar trends in program development and standards based education that are occurring in Australia (Leonard, 2012). A broader global awareness of these initiatives, and associated challenges, are of international benefit to university teacher education programs in the United States. This international perspective will also further benefit teachers as they expand their cultural skills competencies. We must acknowledge that the challenges and implications to teacher preparation are increasingly becoming international in scope.

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