

**Promoting Intercultural Competence in a Globalized Era: Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Practices that Promote Intercultural Competency**

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**Abstract:** The teaching force in the United States of America is still predominantly white and monolingual. Yet, the U.S. population is rapidly becoming culturally and ethnically diverse. As a result, white teachers have expressed doubt in their efficacy in teaching students whose cultures are different than theirs (Helfrich & Bean, 2011). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify and examine instructional practices that promote intercultural competencies effectively. Thus, after experiencing a variety of instructional approaches, the participants (n=92 pre-service teachers) responded to open-ended questions and reflections. Participants also took part in online threaded discussions. Among other findings, data showed that the use of children's literature with a global focus, along with participating in on-going threaded discussions and reflections, helped the participants most in acquiring essential intercultural competencies.

*Key words:* intercultural competence, global education, intercultural education, social studies methods, teacher education, instructional practices, and international service learning

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The teaching force in public schools in the United States is predominantly white, female and monolingual. Although a majority of these educators are well prepared to inculcate their students with academic knowledge and skills that they need in 21st century, they continue to express reservation and doubt about their ability to teach effectively to the many cultural differences that they encounter in their classroom (Helfrich & Bean, 2011). Perhaps because of globalization, the United States has experienced drastic demographics shifts in recent years, including a dramatic increase of cultural and ethnic diversity. Commenting on the effects of globalization, for example, a 2013 UNESCO report remarked that globalization has shrunk the world "bringing a wider range of cultures into closer contact than ever before" (p. 7). In terms of education, then, increased cultural contacts necessitate schools to inculcate their students with essential intercultural competencies by providing an education that is multicultural.

An education for intercultural competencies is designed to broaden learners' perspectives about human differences. It is an education that maximizes people's potentials irrespective of their differences, whether natural or socially constructed (Moll & Gonzale, 2004.) Further, an education for cultural competencies supports the development of social skills, including "tolerance of uncertainty," Majerek (2012, p. 318). Given that globalization has created increased interactions of global cultures, helping students to develop tolerance of uncertainties is invaluable.

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Globalization has resulted in increased mingling of diverse cultures, especially in school settings. Notwithstanding this reality, many teacher-preparation programs in the United States are still lagging behind with regard to preparing educators with essential intercultural competencies (Doppen & An, 2014). The process of acquiring intercultural competencies involves the mastery of many skills, but the ability to use instructional practices that help students to develop a high degree of world-mindedness and intercultural competence is especially helpful (Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007). Equally essential is the ability to utilize instructional strategies that allow learners to understand and appreciate other cultures because different cultures conceptualize and understand the world differently (Tanriverdi, Ulusoy, & Seymen, 2011). Given that educators with a clear understanding and appreciation of intercultural competencies are likely to inculcate their students with similar knowledge and skills, it is necessary to develop a consensus about what intercultural competencies are.

Different scholars define intercultural competencies differently. For example, Deardorff (2006) found that terms such as global competence, multicultural competence, global-mindedness, global perspective, cross-culturally awareness, and intercultural competence are used regularly in different academic disciplines. Notwithstanding the variety of terms used to denote intercultural competencies, the ability to hold multiple perspectives on cultures, events and issues is an essential skill in the field of intercultural competency (Bennett, 1993; Hanvey, 1976; Kirkwood-Tucker, 2009; Merryfield, 2009; Nganga & Kambutu, 2015). But reflecting on the meaning of holding multiple cultural perspectives, Cushner and Chang (2015) credited intercultural competencies for promoting the development of “critical knowledge and skills that enable people to make increasingly more complex perceptual distinctions about their experiences with cultural differences” (p. 167). Evidently, becoming interculturally competent has many benefits.

The benefits of intercultural competency are well documented. For example, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) credited intercultural competency for enabling people to gain knowledge and skills that support effective interactions with unfamiliar world cultures. Similarly, Fantini (2006) considered intercultural competency invaluable because it supports essential skills such as flexibility and intercultural communication. Nevertheless, becoming interculturally competent is a process that requires learning in integrative and inter-cultural learning environments (Merryfield & Wilson, 2005; Zhao, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009). As a result, Zong (2009) advocated for an education that supports the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to intercultural competence in a global age, a postulate that was advocated by Cushner and Chang (2015).

As stated earlier, the acquisition of skills in intercultural competencies is a deliberate act. Although the learning process could assume many formats, Deardorff (2006) recommended learning experiences that factor the following stages:

- Recognition of global systems and their interconnectedness, including openness to other cultures, values, and attitudes;
- Experiencing intercultural skills;
- Gaining general knowledge of history and world events;
- Studying in details areas related to intercultural skills.

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Evidently, the acquisition of essential intercultural competencies is an ongoing process that can take place during any stage in human life. Regardless of where a person starts, however, Deardorff (2006) noted that having the right attitude about becoming interculturally competent is helpful. To support Deardorff's postulate, Okayama, Furuto and Edmondson (2001) commented that "what may be most important is a willingness to make changes . . . underlying attitudes that support everything that can be taught or learned" (p. 97). Becoming interculturally competent necessitates the development of attitudes of respect, openness, cultural awareness and flexibility. Also, because the process of acquiring intercultural competence does not occur naturally, planning intentionally and carefully could have a positive impact.

### **Teaching for Intercultural Competence in a Teacher Education Program**

Increasing cultural diversity in the United States creates a need for teacher education programs to inculcate pre-service teachers with essential knowledge and skills in intercultural competencies. But because the acquisition of pertinent knowledge and skills is an intentional act, teacher education programs need to provide the needed instructional infrastructure. While a number of instructional practices are likely to enhance this important work, an education that promotes quality and informed interactions between people of different cultural persuasions is helpful (Deardorff, 2006). Indeed, in many teacher education programs, the use of content with a global focus, along with availability of carefully planned cultural immersion experiences, is becoming common practice (Zong, 2009).

### ***Using Planned International Cultural Immersion Experiences to Teach for Global/Intercultural Competence***

Carefully planned international cultural immersion experiences provide "unique experiential learning" because they allow learning to take place from a divergent worldview lens, thus enabling learners to become "more global in their thoughts and actions" (Zong, 2009, p. 77). As a result, education experts argue that although international cultural learning experiences could have unintended consequences, the personal and professional benefits inherent in well planned programs make them invaluable instructional practices (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Kambutu & Nganga, 2014). Some of the documented benefits of international cultural immersion experiences, for example, include helping learners to shift their perspectives, while developing an empathetic understanding of the world and its people. But Lewin (2009) indicated that without good planning achieving positive impact on intercultural development through study abroad experiences is impossible. Thus, he recommended a program design that allowed space for "immersion into the host culture, opportunities to develop relationships with people from the culture, and program support for guided critical cultural self-reflection" (p. 159). Critical cultural reflections are especially meaningful because they create learning opportunities that allow students to not only learn about other cultures, but also self-critique with regard to perceptions about heritage cultures, and how those perceptions could influence interactions with unfamiliar cultures. Although self-reflection occurs in many settings, the use of technology is especially helpful.

***Using Technology to Teach Skills in Intercultural Competencies***

Instructional technologies have transformed teaching and learning in dramatic ways. Recently, for example, scholars have explored the benefits of instructional technologies in enhancing pre-service teachers' understanding of global matters (Chadwick & Ralston, 2010; Zong, 2009). One technology that has received close scrutiny is the Internet, and in specific, online threaded discussions. Although online learning, threaded discussions in particular, is quite different from face-to-face discussions, when planned carefully, it is likely to elicit in-depth discussions especially when controversial issues such as prejudice, inequality, privilege, imperialism and injustice are the focus (Merryfield, 2000; Peters, 2009; Zong, 2009). Other studies have shown that online pedagogy was essential at increasing intercultural learning because it served as a "means of communication, understanding and cooperation" with people in any continent, thus promoting a "spirit of tolerance and cosmopolitanism" (Beaven & Alvarez, 2002, para. 10). Although technology is helpful, using course content with a global and intercultural focus is also essential.

***The Use of Course Content and Resources with a Global and Intercultural Focus***

Educators play a significant role in helping learners to gain knowledge and skills about global diversity (Cushner, 2015). As a result, it is the educators' responsibility to ensure that the content in use provides opportunities to learn about global issues, including strategies to solve problems locally, regionally and internationally (Nganga & Kambutu, 2015). Given this important role that educators play in teaching for global mindedness, they should always ensure that they possess essential intercultural competencies. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Instead, many educators are not only less educated about global issues, but they also are likely to marginalize curriculum that has cultural, and or potentially controversial outlook (Kirkwood-Tucker, 2009). Notwithstanding this reluctance, teaching and learning for global mindedness is essential. This is especially true in programs that prepare teachers because these future educators will prepare future generations for global citizenship (Merryfield, 2009; Nganga & Kambutu, 2015; Zong, 2009). As a result, many scholars have spoken strongly in support of educational efforts aimed at helping prospective and practicing teachers to acquire world cultural knowledge (Merryfield, Jarchow, & Pickert, 1997; Nganga, Kambutu, & Russell, 2013). Although educators could use a variety of resources and teaching practices, the use of children's literature with a multicultural theme could help immensely (Mayer, 1997).

The power of multicultural literature in the process of constructing sociocultural images and global experiences is widely acknowledged. For example, multicultural literature can be used to broaden students' understanding of culture, and also to build awareness of cross-cultural, intra-cultural differences and similarities (Nganga & Kambutu, 2015; Wilkins & Gamble, 1998). Reflecting on this essential reality, Rodriguez and Puyal (2012) reported that "the use of literary texts can promote reflection on cultural differences, develop understanding of the home culture, and consequently enhance more tolerant and open attitudes towards other cultures," (p. 108). That said, Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) felt that the use of children's literature with a multicultural focus can truly help learners develop critical awareness by engaging them cognitively and affectively, thus enhancing their ability to analyze critically foreign cultures in order to pave way for intercultural awareness.

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When using children's literature with multicultural focus, teachers should focus on creating an instructional habit of talking about human differences, including an exploration of topics that relate to issues of diversity (Derman-Sparks & Olson-Edwards, 2010). However, many teachers have limited experiences using children's books that are written from the perspective of, or about racial and ethnic differences. While many factors are at play in this reality, most prominent is the fact that diversity calls for numerous issues to be considered when choosing multicultural literature. Therefore, "teachers must learn how to assess books as appropriate for use in the classroom" (Wilkins & Gamble, 1998, p.29). So, when selecting anti-bias culturally responsive children's books, an educator should do so using a critical lens (Derman-Sparks & Olson-Edwards, 2010; Nganga, 2015). Equally important is an assessment of instructional materials to make sure that the used instructional resources counter existing stereotypes and misinformation. In terms of race, for example, an educator should ensure that instructional resources do not portray African Americans as athletes only, and whites as working professionals. Also helpful is ensuring that the teaching materials used do not just show exotic images of any given group. Typically, resources with an exotic focus exaggerate, and/or depict racial groups unrealistically (Derman-Sparks & Olson-Edwards, 2010, Nganga, 2015). So, curriculum for intercultural understanding provides objective cultural knowledge, skills and practices. Notwithstanding the value of an education for intercultural competence, few scholars have examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of classroom practices that they consider helpful in preparing them to teach for global mindedness and intercultural competency.

### **Purpose of This Study**

This study that was conducted in a teacher education program in the Rocky Mountain region in the United States explored pedagogical practices that promote intercultural competence in a social studies course. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What instructional practices helped pre-service teachers the most while learning about global and intercultural competencies?
2. How did planned international cultural immersion experience affect the participants' understanding and appreciation of unfamiliar cultures?

The data reported in this study were generated from teaching activities such as reflections, in-class discussion notes, and online threaded discussions that spanned from 2011 to 2015. Data from an open-ended questionnaire helped the author/researcher to explore the participants' views in-depth (Mukherji & Albon, 2010) because these data provided information on participants' ideas, attitudes and values. The participants in this study were all white (n=92) pre-service teachers. Perhaps because these participants' area of academic focus was elementary education, they were overwhelmingly female (74 or 80%). On the onset, however, the researcher informed the participants that their participation in the study was purely voluntary. Thus, their participation or not would not affect their grade in the course/s in any way. The author collected data from the following courses:

### ***Planned International Cultural Immersion***

Implemented in Kenya, Africa, this summer international cultural immersion experience included a service learning component that enabled students to learn by doing. Thus, in addition to using primary resources to explore the host country's history, geography, cultures, languages, economy, education, archeology, ecology, paleontology and zoology, geopolitical, ethnic, gender issues and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, learners participated in field experiences at local schools. Before travel, participants were engaged in several learning activities such as face-to-face discussions, threaded discussions, online research activities and teleconferences. Also included was a final comparative paper. Course materials that helped learners to understand host cultures were provided and discussed. Upon arrival in Kenya, the instructor met with the participants on a daily basis (morning and evening). These meetings provided a forum to not only discuss expectations, but also debrief and reflect (see appendix 1 for pre-departure and post-teaching open-ended questions).

### ***Social Studies Methods Course***

This course focused on the role of social studies education in an elementary education curriculum. The course was designed on the premise that social studies enhanced opportunities to facilitate inquiry, exploration, and understanding of the society and world in which we live. To that end, global and intercultural content was integrated throughout the course work. Assignments in this course included online threaded discussions, class discussions, reading and analyzing children's literature with a global/intercultural focus. Also included were online research activities and reflections, and writing research papers that focused on various aspects of a foreign nation of the learner's choosing. Research findings were presented during class meetings. Other learning activities included a review of children's books with a global cultural focus. After reviewing a book/s, the participants listed questions that emerged as a result, and commented on the book's value relative to teaching for cultural and global understanding. The generated data were analyzed qualitatively (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Findings**

Using qualitative data analysis, the author looked for emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After conducting a detailed data coding process, several minor themes emerged that the author juxtaposed and melded to develop the following two robust themes: a) Using a variety of instructional practices has most value, and b) Planned cultural immersion offers many opportunities to develop cultural and global awareness. The following is a detailed discussion of these themes.

### **Preferred Instructional Practices**

When asked to identify the instructional practices that helped the participants the most in the process of learning and acquiring intercultural knowledge and global perspectives, several practices were deemed most valuable. Among those practices was the use of content and learning activities with intercultural/global education focus. Also preferred was the use of children's books with cultural and global themes because this instructional practice exposed the participants to the role that educators play as change agents. Meanwhile, the participants preferred the use of web-based technology because

it created space for them to experience foreign cultures, albeit virtually. The following is a detailed discussion of each of the preferred instructional practices.

***a) Course Content and Activities with Intercultural/Global Education Focus***

The participants in this study preferred the integration of course content with a global and intercultural focus because it helped them to develop skills in intercultural competence, thus preparing them to teach such content in their future classrooms. To these participants, an integrated approach to instruction allowed them to not only consider cultural differences, but also explore cultural similarities using a global lens. This is an important finding because it pointed to a possible shift from ethnocentrism to ethno-relative (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). Meanwhile, the participants saw value in using course content with cultural and divergent worldviews because such content examined both the familiar and unfamiliar. The following expert, written after completing a research project, captures this reality rather well:

This project was a great hands-on activity that exposed us to other cultures and traditions. It really showed the cultural similarities and differences between the countries presented. This would be a great learning experience to incorporate in a classroom while teaching about other cultures. (Kristi, reflection in social studies course, 10/20/ 2011)

Evident in this excerpt is the participant's ability to see how she might apply the knowledge learned about world cultures in her own teaching. Indeed, in addition to planning to use the knowledge gained for instructional purposes, the participant showed a willingness to take action (Banks, 2008) based on the skills gained about global cultures. To that end, Sally (cultural immersion threaded discussions, 11/8, 2015) reported that she refused to be silent any more on issues of global cultures. Instead, she offered to use the skills gained to help others learn, understand and appreciate foreign cultures. One learning activity that provides pertinent cultural knowledge and skills is in-class discussions and reflections.

Data showed that the participants gained essential cultural knowledge and skills during in-class discussions and reflections. Reflecting on the associated benefits, a participant reported that in-class discussions and reflections allowed her to "think critically about content, in addition to allowing me to acknowledge both sides of the story, and presenting them with factual information based on reliable sources" (Ponny, in-class notes in social studies course, 10/29/2013). As a result, this participant was ready to "integrate content that exposes students to other cultures and promote intercultural and global competency and activities that engage learners because I want to be the teacher who makes this positive impact on the students," (Medith, in-class discussion notes in social studies course, 10/29/2013). Evidently, the participants in this study appreciated the benefits of infusing globally focused content in regular content. Such infusion not only helped them become aware of different cultures, but also allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of people's histories, and cultural similarities and differences. An additional critical gain is their commitment to using content and learning activities that enhance cultural awareness in their future classrooms.

***b) Using Children's Books with Intercultural and Global Themes***

Data from this study revealed that the participants found the use of children's books with intercultural and global themes helpful. For this activity, the participants read and critiqued a book/s on the way culture was presented in the selected book/s. Although some participants struggled to ascertain why they selected certain books, they favored the assigned learning activity because it enabled them to learn about foreign cultural practices. For example, after studying the book *What We Wear: Dressing Up Around the World* by Ajmera, Derstine and Pon (2012), Tamera reflected that "this book is appropriate because it shows different clothing from all around the world, and by using it for instruction, it will help children to learn to be open-minded by looking at pictures," (reflection notes in social studies course, 11/8/2014). Although Tamera did not respond in depth why the book she selected was appropriate, the selection in itself was a good choice because children's book can easily provoke interest in learning cultural similarities and differences, particularly in areas of clothing. Meanwhile, other reflections suggested that analyzing children's books helped the participants to be receptive to other ways of seeing, thinking, and teaching as is evident in the following reflection:

As a teacher, it is important for me to consider my biases while selecting instructional materials. The assignment to evaluate a children's book was really a revelation for me. I have never considered evaluating children's books. Analyzing and discussing children's stories for unfairness and fairness can help children learn how to recognize such acts in real life and what to do about them. As a teacher, therefore, I should take time to evaluate such materials for stereotypes as well as select materials that children can identify with. (Lucy, in-class discussion notes in social studies, 10/18/2012)

Lucy's reflection emphasizes the importance of selecting children's books that do not confirm stereotype about other cultures. Equally critical is her apparent understanding that using a curriculum for cultural and global understanding could help learners to become aware of acts of unfairness against foreign cultures. Meanwhile, the following reflection shows clearly that other participants found the analysis of children's books beneficial:

In this learning activity, we learned how to evaluate children's books for biases. Before this learning activity, I did not pay attention to pictures in books or what they depicted. Now, I realize how important it is to use books that have photographs that portray all races and ethnicities in a positive manner. When I get my own classroom, I want to make sure it is culturally responsive and respectful of all my students, (Pora, reflection in social studies course, 11/8/2015).

The importance of selecting and using culturally inclusive children's books is, without a doubt, a critical instructional practice. Equally important is the teacher's ability to model pertinent instructional practices. To that end, several participants in this study voiced the importance of classroom teachers' ability to model cultural practices, while practicing the cultural change they would like to see in their students.



***c) Educators as Change Agents***

A critical finding from the collected data delved into the importance of educators as change agents. To that end, a majority of the participants in this study appeared to realize that it is critical for educators to be change agents. In other words, the participants reported that when classroom teachers are not interculturally competent, it is almost impossible for their students to become culturally competent. This finding seems to support the notion that it is the teacher's responsibility to help his/her learners to explore topics that examine cultural differences. To that end, one pre-service teacher indicated that a classroom teacher has to:

Accept his or her role as an agent of change to enable students to learn about the world from different perspectives. For example, I have never seen Christopher Columbus the way I do now. If our instructor did not assign materials and research that helped us to see Columbus from a Native American's perspective, for example, I would have continued to think of him as a hero. The mistreatment of Native Americans was for the most part nothing to make one a hero. The contacted foreign disease that killed many of their people, along with how they were hunted and killed like wild animals and forced to look for precious metals for Columbus and his men is unjust. I am disappointed that I was miss-educated all along. (Toni, threaded discussion in social studies course, 11/8/ 2011)

The above reflection shows the apparent transformation that teaching for change is likely to cause. Apparently, Toni is empathetic to the treatment of Native Americans based on the new information gained. Additionally, she showed cognitive flexibility in that she used the new information to help her to come up with a conclusion that she has been "mis-educated all along." When learning for intercultural competence is in place, a new cognitive awakening is realized. This kind of awakening is essential, but becoming a change agent is likely to happen when ideal learning conditions are in place. Pora's (2015) reflection in a social studies course addressed the importance of providing supportive learning conditions:

I liked how well we interacted during in-class discussions and the respect that was accorded to each of us during presentations. If we presented erroneous information, the instructor asked questions that made us think, and directed us to new resources. If we brought in new information, the instructor gave us the opportunity to share. We were acknowledged. Everyone's perspectives were respected. This was very helpful. (Pora, threaded discussion in social studies, 11/8, 2015)

Pora's sentiment is supported by Fantini (2006) and Deardorff (2006) in their recommendation for instructors to support their students. Such support is essential because it motivates students to embrace new knowledge and skills.

***d) Using Technology to Teach for Cultural Understanding***

Data showed that the participants in this study favorably viewed the use of modern technologies, web-based technology especially. For example, Conny reflected on the value of modern technologies for instructional purposes:

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I thoroughly enjoyed threaded discussions because they gave me an opportunity to see what my peers were thinking about. After reading a post on why one participant in our international service-learning course choose [sic] to travel, I was reassured of my own interest. I never thought about the advantage of travelling to Kenya with a professor who knows the local languages, and it just dawned on me how that was going to be an asset in my learning. The opportunity of traveling with a native professor was really helpful as we were able to experience the real culture by being immersed in the community. Tourists generally don't get this opportunity of interaction with local communities. This was very helpful in learning about another culture. (Conny, cultural immersion threaded discussion, 7/12/2015)

Although threaded discussions were helpful in that learners had a platform to share their thoughts freely, participants credited it for creating a space for the participants to share their perspectives and thoughts about foreign cultures. Responding to the benefits of threaded discussions, Kaitryn added that:

Responding to my peers as well as the prompts provided by the instructor was helpful in many ways. It encouraged us to share our thoughts and created a deeper understanding of different cultural aspects. It was interesting to see diverse thoughts on similar topics. (cultural immersion threaded discussion, 12/5/2011)

Although threaded discussions encouraged divergent and creative thinking, another apparent benefit is the support for critical thinking. Indeed, because of online discussions, many participants in this study reported that they were able to engage in self-reflection about course work. Additionally, the participants were able to think about practices that enhance intercultural competence in their personal lives, including ways to help others, especially their future students. Meanwhile the students in this study found other teaching approaches, including open-ended questions, meaningful because they provided a platform for dialogue with peers. For example, in one threaded discussion post, Erina (10/29/2013) commented that open-ended questions prompted others to think about ways to promote respect in the classroom when working with diverse learners. To that end, she credited her peers for utilizing threaded discussions to “respectfully share our opinions.” In response to Erina’s observation, Dusty noted that it was important for teachers to model behaviors that show respect for diverse learners:

That's a very good question, Erina. I guess I would just let everyone know that some conversations are not appropriate for schools. We would then talk about respecting differences. At the same time, I actually would respect a student who wants to talk about his/her religion because many students and adults want to hide what they believe in. They don't want to be different, so if they want to share, I would have to respect that, (threaded discussions in social studies course, 10/29/2013).

### **Planned International Cultural Immersion Experiences**

Data from this study indicated that planned cultural immersion experiences were critical to helping the participants develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures. To that end, for example, a majority of the participants reflected on how their interactions with people in the host country opened their eyes to new ways of thinking about other cultures. After participating in a 2015

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cultural immersion program, for example, Molly (threaded discussion notes, 7/12/ 2015) commented that:

I now understand Kenyan culture better through experiences of critical reflection and having first hand experiences and interactions with the local people. To be an effective educator, one needs to respect and appreciate all cultural groups. Teaching at the Karati school was a highlight. As a teacher in America, it was eye-opening to not only see the classrooms and students, but to teach the students. Overall, it was a life-changing trip and I hope I am able to return for another service learning project.

In the above reflection, Molly noted that to become an effective educator, one needs to understand other cultures. Understanding other cultures is an important aspect in intercultural competency because it allows people to contextualize cultural interactions. Consider, for example, John's quote below that shows how he contextualized his interaction with both school children and educators in Kenya.

I was nervous about language barriers. I thought the children in Kenya did not speak English. But when I started teaching, I was impressed with the children and the level of respect they showed their teachers. This was very different than any American classroom I have experienced. It takes month to build such type of rapport with American learners. The students were shy, may be because it was their first time being taught by a Musungu (White) person. Kenyan children learn both English and Kiswahili (their national language), as such, I just had to slow down when I spoke so they could understand my American accent (threaded discussion in cultural immersion course, 7/12/2015).

In the above reflection, it is evident that John's initial preference was to use his heritage culture to make meaning of new cultural experiences. But by interacting with students and their teachers in the host culture, he was able to gain new cultural insights. This apparent change is typical of what happens when one is immersed in a foreign culture. Studies show that teaching in a foreign culture not only allows educators to gain cultural understanding, but also increases their sensitivity to cultural injustice (Merryfield, 2000).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Data from this study support the importance of using course content with intercultural and global focus to help learners gain knowledge and skills for global and cultural competence. But even though using the appropriate content is key, the participants in this study highlighted the critical role that educators' knowledge plays. Therefore, these participants postulated that while teacher knowledge of diverse cultures is essential, it is critical for all educators to model and encourage their students to always consider different cultural perspectives. Indeed, educators must always be ready to see themselves not just as teachers, but also as agents of social change. Although educators for social change select teaching and learning resources carefully, they also think continually about learning outcomes. In addition, teachers for social change support and promote behaviors that are non-judgmental, and they also provide nurturing classroom environments.

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A nurturing learning environment is an inviting place. As a result, educators in a nurturing learning space establish authentic and meaningful relationships with their students. In a nurturing learning environment, a practice of collaboration is the norm. When educators collaborate with their students, they are able to accomplish common goals while promoting tolerance for ambiguity (Cushner & Chang, 2015). In this study, a nurturing learning environment was established in a variety of ways, including providing many opportunities for online threaded discussions. Although online discussions are typically impersonal, participants in this study acknowledged that the planned threaded discussions created a space for critical reflections that went beyond offering cultural information. This was perhaps possible because the instructor combined threaded discussions with other instructional approaches such as research projects and critiques of children's books prior to assigning online discussions. The additional learning activities not only helped learners to contextualize their thinking about unfamiliar cultures, but also provided space for them to process cross-cultural issues, thus facilitating the acquisition of various cultural competencies. Essentially, then, threaded discussions provided invaluable scaffolding opportunities (Lee, 2011; Merryfield, 2000).

Ideally, threaded discussions enable teachers to give up the power of being the one delivering knowledge, thus allowing learning to become collaborative in the process of constructing new knowledge. Planned carefully, therefore, online learning, threaded discussions especially, can play a key role in the development of intercultural competence. As learners interact with information and the perspectives of other learners, they are able "to go beyond superficial facts," and instead, they develop an open mind to "other cultures so that they understand cross-cultural perspectives with non-judgmental attitudes and respect" (Lee, 2011, p. 90). Data from this study show that the use of visuals is especially helpful in the process of developing non-judgmental attitudes.

Participants in this study examined children's books that had a cultural focus. While analyzing children's books, the participants learned that it is important to consider content and visual representations of people from diverse backgrounds in order to ascertain that non-judgmental representations are used. Being able to scrutinize teaching and learning resources for bias is essential because it creates space to view cultural differences from a more positive perspective rather than from a deficit model (Chartock, 2010). Additionally, this awareness could allow educators to adjust instructional practices in order to address the needs of diverse students. Evidently, well-selected global and multicultural literature could help learners to see how the world is more connected, and therefore, understand the need to appreciate different points of view.

In all, findings from this study have implications for social studies courses in teacher education programs. Based on the findings from this study, for example, it is important for course instructors to consider using multiple instructional practices in order to enhance intercultural competence. Indeed, Dunn, Doston, Cross, Kesner and Lundahl (2014) reported that an instructional balance was always helpful. To that end, they recommended the use of context-driven assignments, theoretical readings, discussions, active reflections and cultural immersion. But because not all learners have the opportunity to experience cultural immersion, the use of intercultural and global education course content is helpful. Equally helpful are educators who consider themselves agents of social change and role models in supporting and enhancing knowledge and skills in intercultural competence.

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Clearly, then, there is not a single instructional practice that is ideal for promoting global mindedness and intercultural competencies. Rather, a combination of instructional practice, including the use of children's literature with a global focus, cultural immersion experiences, the use of technology (online discussions), and participating in in-class discussions and reflections are likely to promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills essential to global mindedness and intercultural competencies.

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**Appendix 1**

International service learning

*On-site guidelines*

1. Arrive on site ready to work with the local community.
2. Respect local community's dress code and values.
3. Actively engage in work and interact with the local people.
4. Learn to use new tools.
5. Show respect when answering questions that might not align with your belief system.
6. While in the classrooms, observe how local teachers interact with students during their teaching before you teach.
7. Be flexible.

*International service learning pre-teaching questions*

Before departure from the United States, participants were asked to respond to the following questions.

- 1.) a. If this is your first time traveling to the host country, please describe in a paragraph what comes to mind when you think of the country. (If you have been in the host country on a previous international study abroad experience, skip this question and respond to (b).)  
b. If you have been to host country, describe why you are going back.
- 2.) a. Why did you choose to participate in this country?  
b. What are your expectations in this course?
- 3.) a. What is your understanding of international service learning?  
b. What motivated you to take part in international service learning.
- 4.) In your profession, how might having a "global consciousness" help? Defend your claim with research.

*Post-teaching questions*

Upon return to the United States, participants were asked to react to the following questions

1. Upon arrival in Kenya, what was most shocking? Why?
2. Discuss the social issues (problems) that you observed in Kenya (who, what, where).
3. Based on your international service learning experiences/course work & research, what do you see as possible solutions to these social issues?
4. What similarities and differences are there between the types of social issues faced by Kenyan and U.S. citizens?
5. How can citizens of the world solve these types of social problems? What role does civic engagement play?
6. What are some negative and positive consequences of globalization for Kenya? Also consider your observations and class discussions while in Kenya (Support with other research on globalization).
7. Service learning is as much about learning about others as it is about learning about ourselves: Discuss this statement as it relates to you as a global citizen and your Kenya experiences.
8. Upon your departure from Kenya, what was different for you? (Connect your apprehension, prior experiences if any, and your thoughts before and after, etc.)
9. How do you hope to use your newly acquired knowledge?
10. Did the travel meet your expectations? Explain.

**Appendix 2**

Reflection questions: Social studies methods course

*Pre-teaching questions*

1. What is your definition of intercultural education?
2. What values and attitudes are fundamental to developing a global perspective and intercultural understanding? Why?
3. What skills do you possess that reflects a global minded educator?
4. What additional skills do you think you need to keep learning in this course to keep developing intercultural skills and global competence?

*Post teaching reflections*

- a. Based on course work activities, in what ways has your definition on intercultural education changed if any? Explain.
- b. What learning experiences influenced your learning the most?
- c. What does it mean to teach for intercultural competence and global understanding?
- d. Describe an activity that you might do with your students that ties global education, social justice and cultural competence. What concepts would be your focus and why?