OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

K-12 Schooling through Virtual Exchange: Opportunities in a Fractured Context

Nicole Hinshaw
The George Washington Graduate School of Education and Human Development

Stephanie Gonzalez
The George Washington Graduate School of Education and Human Development

Laura Engel
The George Washington Graduate School of Education and Human Development

ABSTRACT

The study considers the opportunities and barriers facing the implementation of virtual exchange in K-12 education, and the perceptions of access to these opportunities for underrepresented students in the context of the federal US education system. These issues are examined through the lens of a domestic program offered by Empatico known as Empathy Across the US. Our findings point to several of the known barriers in the facilitation of virtual exchange, including technology access and pressing demands facing teachers, both of which impact accessibility. This study offers insights into how teachers in different settings perceive and experience the implementation of a domestic model of virtual exchange. As K-12 virtual exchange programs often rely on the willingness of teachers to implement these kinds of programs outside of the official school curriculum, our research indicated the importance of system-wide investment and structural support for domestic virtual exchange beyond individual champions.

Keywords: virtual exchange, COVID-19 pandemic, empathy, K-12 education, race

Internationalization, a process of incorporating international, intercultural, and global perspectives into different education contexts, is a growing trend in K-12 settings. A fragmented and often unequal process, particularly in public education settings, internationalization entails a range of practices and innovations thought to further infuse education with values of empathy, cultural understanding, and global and intercultural connectivity (Engel et al., 2020; Maxwell et al., 2018). These various initiatives include a range of curricular and pedagogical initiatives, such as virtual exchange (VE) and student mobility, including K-12 study abroad. Compared with in-person exchanges, VE is frequently argued to be more cost effective and accessible to more students, including those from lower income backgrounds. As K-12 VE programs are frequently facilitated or enabled by educators, VE is also lauded for enriching teacher professional development through the ways that it directly and indirectly exposes teachers to cross-cultural perspectives. However, recent studies suggest that there remain significant contextual challenges facing teachers and schools in managing VE, including navigating different time zones, uneven access to technology, and existing demands in K-12 education, including standards and testing schedules (Baroni et al., 2019; O'Dowd, 2018).

In this paper, we focus on opportunities and barriers facing the implementation of VE in K-12 education in the context of the federal US education system. We also examine perceptions of access to virtual exchange opportunities for underrepresented students, including those from racial/ethnic minitories and lower socio-economic households. We draw on a larger study funded by the Stevens Initiative, which examined a domestic VE program known as Empathy Across the US. This VE program, run by Empatico, connected 67 educators and 1,450 students in a domestic exchange between different cities across the US to build empathy and skills in social emotional learning (SEL) through discussions of race and racial difference. Our paper is driven by two research questions: (1) What barriers and opportunities exist regarding VE program adoption at the K-12 level? and (2) How do teachers perceive the access of underrepresented K-12 students to VE? Generated from a qualitative case study of the Empatico VE program, our findings are based on our analysis of semi-structured interviews with five program staff, four field coordinators, and 18 educators who served as VE facilitators.

Our findings point to several of the known barriers in the facilitation of VE, including technology access and pressing demands facing teachers, both of which impact accessibility of VE. As K-12 VE programs often rely on the willingness of teachers to implement these programs outside of the official school curriculum, our research furthers the discussions of barriers to VE in K-12 by indicating the importance of system-wide investment beyond individual champions of VE to provide the structural supports necessary to assist teachers in bringing this enriching practice to their classrooms. Considering the monumental changes to K-12 teaching modes and functions during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the deepening of inequalities in US K-12 schooling, our paper offers insights into how teachers in different K-12 settings perceive and experience the implementation of VE.

LITERATURE REVIEW

K-12 Virtual Exchange

Since the 1980s, schooling has reflected a 'global turn,' marked by educational discourse and a series of reforms seeking to cultivate the kinds of citizens required by the 21st century (Engel, 2020). Among the global skills thought to be needed by young people is the ability to analyze the world beyond local and national boundaries, understanding of multiple cultural perspectives beyond one's own, ability to communicate with culturally diverse individuals and groups, and initiative to create positive change toward globally-oriented problems (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). The landscape of education is rapidly changing with the utility of educational technologies, mandating an on-going need to create links between digital tools and the capacities deemed significant for citizens in the global age (Kahne et al., 2016). As schools have sought to adjust to these demands, internationalization has become a growing commitment of stakeholders at all levels of the educational system.

Internationalization, already well-engrained in the discourse, scholarship, and practice of higher education as institutions, has become more centrally part of the K-12 realm (Engel, 2020) and comprises a range of practices, including international exchanges and study abroad, described as 'abroad' internationalization and curricular and pedagogical initiatives, referred to as 'at home' internationalization (Knight, 2008). Internationalization 'at home' includes opportunities for intercultural learning throughout the domestic educational environment (Beelen & Jones, 2015). As a leading form of 'at home' internationalization, curriculum internationalization focuses on how institutions can adapt their curriculum to more global orientations. Curriculum internationalization can be thought about as "the main conduit to communicate, sequence, and connect learning from within the field of study to the greater world through the learner; it [is] central to broadening learning beyond the national framing" (Woodman & Engel, in press). Digital technologies have continued to affect the educational landscape, and pertinent to internationalization, offer new ways to incorporate cross-cultural and global perspectives into education. One prime example of this is the rise of VE, a growing trend that directly connects the teaching and learning process across cultural and geographical boundaries (O'Dowd, 2021; Stevens Initiative, 2021).

Virtual exchange is an approach that "connects young people from diverse places using everyday technology for collaborative learning and interaction through sustained and facilitated engagement" (Stevens Initiative, n.d.). It "consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction take place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators" (Evolve, n.d.). Because VE is thought of as a tool to enhance intercultural competencies (Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011), it can be designed either internationally

or domestically, though research and programming have tended to focus more on international VE.

VE has frequently been framed as a cost-effective and accessible form of internationalization in comparison to "abroad" mobility programs, which are often expensive and accessible to a small fraction of the teacher and student populations (Hilliker, 2020; Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011). As noted by Himelfarb and Idriss (2011), virtual programs are deemed significant facilitators of cross-cultural exchange because they are "embedded in curricula and with a cross-cultural educational purpose will improve the number, diversity, and experience of international exchange participants" (p. 1). The argument that VE is an important alternative to in-person international exchanges has continued to grow in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic with the widespread closure of schools, colleges, and universities and the shift to distance learning models, as well as the grounding of physical travel.

Literature suggests that despite the arguments that it is a more accessible and comprehensive form of curricular internationalization, there are risks to positioning VE as the "golden child" of internationalization. First, comparisons between virtual and physical exchanges are unnecessarily competitive and potentially harmful: "virtual and physical exchange are such different experiences, there is a clear risk of comparing apples and oranges... While both experiences involve situations of intercultural contact and communication, the learning experience is clearly different" (O'Dowd, 2021, p. 212). By placing different forms of exchange in competition with one another, it assumes that VE – both its institutional implementation and its outcomes for participants – is fully understood when in fact VE is often "misunderstood and undervalued" and "lost between the different silos" (O'Dowd, 2021, p. 213). Similarly, for K-12 contexts, there is a lack of understanding about VE, how it can be organized and structured, and its main benefits and challenges. Second, by labeling VE as the more accessible alternative, it overlooks some of the central power dynamics of VE and barriers to its ethical implementation. To that end, similar to physical mobility programs, VE can be both fractured and unequal, utilized more frequently in 'elite' school settings (Maxwell et al., 2018). Many scholars and students have argued that there remain notable issues with inaccessibility of digital technology and problematic power dynamics given the prominent role that the English language plays in international VE programs (Woodman & Engel, in press).

Given these different dimensions and the widespread growth in the VE field, it is significant to build understandings of VE programming and its implications both across levels and contexts. In the last decade, there has been a growth of organizations focused on VE, such as the Global Nomads Group, iEARN-USA, Empatico, Soliya, and others. Many of these organizations have tended to focus on exchanges at the higher education level, with recent and growing attention to the K-12 realm. In the Stevens Initiative 2021 Survey of the Virtual Exchange field, 233 institutions and organization around the world reported implementing some form of VE. More than half (56%) were institutions of higher education, whereas roughly 5% were primary or secondary education institutions (Stevens Initiative, 2021). This suggests not only the underdevelopment of K-12 VE

overall, but also the underdevelopment of research focused on understanding K-12 teacher and student experiences in VE.

Given the turn to online learning in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the notable growth in the VE field, we sought to understand the shape and form of VE in K-12 settings. In particular, we aimed to focus on teacher experiences as facilitators of domestic K-12 VE, given the dearth of studies focused on K-12 VE in domestic settings. To that end, our paper focuses on examining the barriers and opportunities that exist regarding K-12 VE and secondly, drawing on a case study of a single, domestically-focused VE program, to understand how teachers perceive the access of VE for students of color, students from low-income households, and students with learning differences.

K-12 Domestic Virtual Exchange

Our study focuses on the K-12 level in the federal US education system, where decision-making occurs at state and local levels, and where non-governmental actors and edu-businesses possess considerable influence (Wallner et al., 2020). Though it varies somewhat state-to-state with some US states more decentralized than others, state-level departments of education oversee important aspects of schooling, including financial, political, and administrative components. At the local level, key actors typically include publicly elected school boards, a superintendent, and staff within a school district. Also driving the agenda and practice of internationalization are a range of cross-state organizations, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, philanthropic organizations, and interest groups who advocate for global competence education and fund internationalization activities; however, these efforts are often concentrated in particular contexts or settings and are not universally applied in any uniform or comprehensive manner.

Given the educational governance model in the US context, it is not surprising that internationalization is a fractured and often grassroots, bottom-up movement in particular states, districts, or individual schools and classrooms (Engel, 2020; Frey & Whitehead, 2009; Ortloff & Shonia, 2015; Rapaport, 2010). While many states and districts seem to be driven by similar pragmatic rationales to cultivate the 'globally competent' or 'globally ready' learner, the forms that internationalization takes in K-12 settings are varied from a focus on curricular initiatives in world language and VE, to short-term exchanges abroad. The variance is also illustrated in how schools managed the move to distance learning in the wake of COVID-19, with some remaining virtual through the academic year 2020-2021 and others maintaining in-person learning in the same period. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated inequities throughout the K-12 education space and the importance of systematic support for technological modes of education.

The accessibility and effectiveness of virtual learning opportunities relies heavily on the decisions made by educational, non-profit, and governmental leaders regarding a school's technological infrastructure. The 'digital divide' refers to the varying levels of access to technology experienced by members of different demographic groups (Rhymes & Sessoms-Penny, 2021). The pandemic

further highlighted the digital divide experienced widely throughout the US and particularly for Black, Latinx, and Native American students and teachers, as well as those living in rural areas (Chandra et al., 2020; Ong, 2020). The fractured leadership structure of the K-12 schooling system and its decision-making process underscores the importance of system-wide support when it comes to both internationalization and the integration of digital technologies in support of this mission, such as through VE (Rhymes & Sessoms-Penny, 2021).

As the K-12 environment reckons with integrating digital technologies in schools and navigates growing policy discourse on the importance of cultivating the globally and interculturally competent learner, new avenues for incorporating VE in K-12 have emerged. One of the leading providers of K-12 VE is Empatico, funded by the Kind Foundation. Empatico seeks to connect global classrooms with students ages 5-14 to build awareness of emotional and cognitive empathy while fostering relationships across differences. For all Empatico programs participation is completely free for teachers and students, including access to its technology platform, which includes built-in video, messaging, and scheduling tools. In addition, the platform includes activity lesson plans and related reading materials for both students and teachers.

Empathy Across the US (EAU)

Our study centers on a single Empatico-led VE program, Empathy across the US (EAU), which connected 67 educators and 1,450 students in a domestic exchange between different cities across the US. The EAU pilot program represented a shift in Empatico's typical VE offerings in two distinct ways: First, whereas much of Empatico's programming focuses on cross-national VE, EAU offered teachers the opportunity to participate in VE domestically through a within-country program that focused on discussions of race and racial difference; Second, the pilot sought to encourage behavioral empathy in students by empowering them to take action within their home communities. While empathy is a primary lens through which Empatico pursues all its VE programs, the EAU with its focus on race was created in 2020 in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the racial reckoning of the summer of 2020 to cultivate students' social awareness around existing racial inequities in the US and empower students to take action on injustice in their communities. The program sought to increase cross-cultural awareness and knowledge about race and racial injustice through VE. As part of the program, teachers in grades 3-5 were matched with a partner classroom elsewhere in the US and expected to complete four in-class activities and four virtual exchanges. The program's stated goals were to:

1. Encourage students to explore who they are and meet peers from different social identities (including race), recognizing and gaining an appreciation for similarities and differences.
2. Enable students to learn more about their communities, explore issues that might exist, and think critically about how and why they might affect others differently.

3. Empower students to take informed, compassionate action addressing community issues by collaborating with their partner classmates. (Empatico Teacher Training, 2021)

Guided by literature elaborated above and particularly the lack of studies focused on domestic K-12 VE, we developed a case study of the EAU program to understand the barriers and opportunities that exist for K-12 VE program adoption, and how teachers perceive the access of underrepresented students to K-12 VE.

METHODOLOGY

This study explored a single domestic VE program implemented across different K-12 environments. Our research centered on the barriers and opportunities for facilitating virtual exchange and the perceptions of access to virtual exchange for underrepresented students. Through a qualitative case study that was inductive in its emergence from the data, we sought to understand two primary research questions: (1) What barriers and opportunities exist regarding VE program adoption at K-12 level? and (2) How do teachers perceive the access of underrepresented K-12 students to VE? The case study began with an initial design of research questions but left flexibility for adjustments throughout data collection and analysis (Stake, 1995). This study was determined to be exempt from Institutional Review Board human subjects approval due to the minimal risk faced by research participants and the protection of their identifying information. The primary research method involved interviews with a purposeful sample of 27 individuals including five program staff, four field coordinators – charged with recruiting and supporting teachers in the program – and 18 teachers who facilitated the VE program. The sample of teachers were representative of the larger population of teachers participating in EAU. As noted in Table 1, most of the teachers, referred to throughout this paper by randomly generated pseudonyms, identified as white (72%) and all identified as female. The teachers varied in teaching experience (range: 0-16+ years), and previous experience with VE programs (50%). Teachers also varied in the racial and socioeconomic composition of their respective classrooms.

Table 1: Teacher Participant Table

Pseudonym	VE Experience	Teaching Experience	Grade Level
Emily	Experienced	Mid-Career	5th grade
Angelica	New to VE	Late-Career	3rd grade
Becky	Experienced	Mid-Career	Mixed
Devon	New to VE	Mid-Career	3rd grade
Celine	Experienced	Mid-Career	5th grade
Daniela	Experienced	Late-Career	Mixed

Alicia	New to VE	Early Career	5th grade
Patty	New to VE	Late-Career	3rd grade
Jamie	New to VE	Late-Career	3rd grade
Carla	Experienced	Late-Career	5th grade
Janine	Experienced	Late-Career	4th grade
Samantha	Experienced	Mid-Career	4th grade
Kate	New to VE	Late-Career	6th grade
Candace	Experienced	Late-Career	3rd grade
Monica	New to VE	Early Career	5th grade
Susan	Experienced	Late-Career	3rd grade
Natalie	New to VE	Late-Career	4th grade
Lucy	New to VE	Late-Career	Mixed

Note. Mixed grade level participants taught more than one age or grade level simultaneously.

Data collection included 45-minute semi-structured interviews via phone with program staff, field coordinators, and teachers. Staff interviews were exploratory and provided insight into program scope and context, whereas field coordinators and teachers more directly focused on their experiences implementing the program. Teacher interviews were conducted after they had facilitated their first or second virtual exchange and before completing the program. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Empatico staff interviews were analyzed to better understand the program's goals, curriculum, and recruitment strategies and to adjust interview protocols for teacher and field coordinator interviews as necessary. All interviews were de-identified and coded for emergent themes using a software program (Dedoose).

Data analysis followed a conventional content analysis approach (Hseih & Shannon, 2005), which began with initial reads of transcripts for immersive understanding, followed by emergent coding for key concepts that were reiterated throughout the interviews such as "cross-cultural experiences," "district support for program," and "COVID-19 impact." We also used in vivo codes frequently, for example, "read alouds for complicated issues" and "Chromebooks help." Emergent codes were then categorized into meaningful clusters and themes such as "issues of access" and "VE implementation dependent on contextual factors" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Triangulation was established through inter-rater reliability discussions and code checks involving the three authors of the paper and one other research assistant (Stake, 1995). Using content analysis in an under-researched field of K-12 VE allowed the research team to gain direct information from study participants without imposing preconceived theoretical perspectives on the data (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). In the findings, we focus on two main themes from the data selected based on our research questions and the emergent

themes from the data: (1) barriers and opportunities to facilitating K-12 VE and (2) "champions" of VE.

FINDINGS

Barriers and Opportunities for Facilitating Virtual Exchange

Consistent with existing literature on barriers to VE, teachers and staff involved in the EAU program experienced several contextual challenges, including managing communication across varying time zones and calendars and balancing other responsibilities such as testing (Baroni et al., 2019; O'Dowd, 2018). As the program launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, specific challenges and opportunities also arose regarding technology access and modes of instruction. The COVID-19 pandemic led schools to mass-employ virtual learning, utilizing a variety of online platforms to continue educating students remotely. For some schools, this allowed both students and teachers to develop familiarity with virtual platforms, presenting a great opportunity to implement virtual exchange: "because of the [virtual] platform, teachers were already kind of in a perfect position...to do this because they were reaching out to their kids this way" (Melissa). However, Melissa, a field coordinator, continued that "if [the] school or the teacher didn't have the structures in place, it would have hindered the ability to see through this programming [EAU] through." This sentiment is consistent with that of several teachers who attributed the technological infrastructure established within their schools or districts to the ease of implementing the EAU program. Celine shared that facilitation of the program was made easier because "the district has been so supportive in providing those devices, students that normally wouldn't be able to access something like this from home, are able to." Teachers commented that students were provided with one-to-one devices and/or hotspots which prepared them to be able to effectively participate in the EAU program: "Every child has a Chromebook, and every child has their headphones so they can be heard" (Carla). However, just as access to resources helped prepare teachers to implement VE, a lack of resources presented a barrier.

Several teachers reported challenges their students faced with maintaining stable internet connectivity or obtaining technological devices. Due to these challenges, one teacher, Lucy, commented that the EAU program should not be "dependent upon technology" at all, it should be incorporated as a standalone, in-person course. The conversation about a lack of technological infrastructure was prevalent especially when teachers and coordinators were asked to consider the experiences of underrepresented schools and students. While the EAU program is free for teachers and students, additional financial incentives, or support for schools and/or classrooms serving underrepresented populations was discussed as a potential way to improve access. Alicia stated that support for underrepresented schools should come from the district level: "if it's virtual and the student doesn't have a Chromebook, provid[e] them that Chromebook. Or if a student doesn't have a hotspot, provid[e] them that hotspot." However, even in districts where

resources were provided to students, a teacher commented that the outreach might have still excluded certain populations: "if a kid didn't have a device to use at home, our school supplied one through the district, but I know that didn't happen in the poor communities" (Patty).

The individual classroom mode of instruction also played a role in the implementation of VE. The virtual or hybrid nature of many classrooms that participated in EAU presented as both a barrier and an opportunity. While some teachers and field coordinators found EAU's virtual program to offer flexibility needed during a time when students were attending both remotely and in-person, several teachers reported that the virtual exchange would have been more accessible to all students had it been offered during a time when all students were in the classroom. Melissa commented that because of the challenges that students faced with the virtual learning environment during the pandemic, especially those who are underrepresented: "going back in person...is what allowed them to access [EAU]." This idea was echoed by Becky, a teacher who reported that she was not able to always include her students who encountered poor internet connectivity at home in the EAU program. Hybrid virtual/in-person classrooms appeared to further present a complication for the implementation of VE, especially when partner schools encountered mixed-modal instruction. Devon, a teacher, elaborated on the issues she encountered working with an all in-person partner school while her students participated remotely: "When we Zoom in, [my students are] all on their individualized computers...because they're home. But Ms. [redacted] students are all in the classroom at a table. So in terms of really connecting face to face, it's kind of hard to do that."

An additional barrier to facilitating the EAU program emerged because of the program's primary content area, empathy across racial differences. Participants shared their hesitations in explicitly addressing race in the classroom: "I think it's really scary for teachers. I think they're afraid that... For white teachers, specifically, I think they're afraid they're going to say the wrong thing. And that's a barrier" (Susan). Despite the EAU program's curricular focus on identity and race, teachers often described the program and its content using neutral language. Instead of discussing racial difference during their virtual exchanges, they referred to conversations about broad "similarities and differences" amongst their students. Teachers described neutral topics such as the weather in different locations in the US or similarities in interests such as hunting or playing the same musical instruments. Teachers appeared more comfortable finding similarities and differences in neutral topics than those that were racially-based, despite the program's primary focus on building empathy through a focus on race.

Teachers who spoke directly about engaging in conversations about race through EAU had other experiences that contributed to their comfort level such as their own backgrounds, previous cross-cultural experiences, or other professional development experiences. Participants spoke about district and school-wide professional development about race and anti-racism in schools:

> Since our district has started the anti-racism education and since really diving into what this Empathy Across America is about and doing it with

my class, I feel so much more comfortable about bringing up and having conversations. It's okay to say, Black and Brown students, it's okay to bring up LGBTQ issues and talk about gender and identity. And it's okay to have those conversations where it always felt a little less comfortable. (Jamie)

Those with district-wide professional development (PD) on race varied in their feelings about the district's support for having conversations about race. Some teachers spoke about the district's commitment and their administration's defense of anti-racism education in conversations with parents and community members while others shared that their districts had remained outwardly silent to students and families while simultaneously conducting PD on race for teachers. Participants also discussed their own backgrounds and lived experiences in terms such as being "global citizens," living and working in different locations in the US, and going "away" and returning "home" to teach, all of which they saw as helping to prepare them to undertake the EAU.

The curriculum for EAU was intentionally designed to be approachable to all teachers and students across a diverse set of classrooms. However, the design did not necessarily consider heterogeneous classrooms like that of Samantha's where white students seemed to feel more comfortable participating than underrepresented students: "I have a lot of allies in my classroom and people that want to be allies, but sometimes I feel like when we have these discussions, I'm hearing more from my white students than I am my students of color" (Samantha). Prescriptive materials from Empatico provided the criteria for conversations and enabled access because teachers did not have to create their own; yet, in doing so, the curriculum materials were not contextualized to the classroom demographics, shared language, and lived experiences of the community. The curriculum was designed to be accessible to all students across all contexts but participants in the program varied in their comfort in contributing to conversations about race and identity in VE.

Opportunities and Barriers to K-12 VE: Emphasis on the Individual "Champions" of VE

In K-12 settings, access to VE for students is managed or monitored by individual teachers. As K-12 VE programs often rely on the willingness of teachers to implement these programs outside of the official school curriculum, teachers became gatekeepers for VE programming in their respective schools, in which teachers' own participation in EAU enabled students' access to the VE opportunity. Teachers and field coordinators alike noted that the accessibility of the program depended most on a teacher's willingness to "go above and beyond" in engaging with VE: "It all depends on the teacher and are they willing to do it? And also, is the district... Is their teaching load so great that they cannot add one more thing?" (Jamie). Often, participating teachers opted to participate without system-wide supports and faced extensive barriers. Teachers who found support

from their schools/districts described fewer barriers to engaging in VE work, in part due to increased access to technology.

While recruitment patterns differed across districts and schools, teacher participation was often encouraged by the existence of a "champion" of VE within their school or district. Field coordinators, educators who work in local school districts but have been selected as a coordinator because of their relationship with Empatico from previous programs, were critical to teacher recruitment. Teacher participants learned about the program from varying sources, often through field coordinators in their district, another participating teacher, or an individual school/district-level "champion" of VE, including school administrators. For example, Kate, stated that a fellow teacher "sent out an email. She really advocated for it. She really put herself out there and had meetings...across the district." Jamie described how other teachers had participated in Empatico programs, and "brought it to administration," which circulated information about EAU. While field coordinators served as the primary source for recruitment, some teachers sought out the EAU program independently or were recruited through an Empatico staff member because of their previous participation in similar programs. Most frequently, decisions about whether to participate were largely left up to the teachers to self-select and register to participate.

Teachers weighed the decision to participate in EAU against several factors. They reflected upon the constraints faced as a result of competing priorities and demands placed on their time: "Teachers are interested in these things [VE programs], but with the pandemic, they're so overwhelmed" (Celine). Devon agreed, sharing "teachers are more stressed out, they're not going to take on any additional projects" and Jen shared that this was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic: "Teachers are trying to get prepared for testing and things like that. And then something happens that they have to fulfill that they weren't anticipating or their class is quarantined... unfortunately, Empatico is going to be the first [thing] that they drop." Data from several teacher interviews showed that teacher participation was often weighed against their responsibilities to cover standards-based content, pressures related to high-stakes standardized testing, and meeting the needs of their students. For example, one teacher stated: "I have to be able to get through my standards and we have every two weeks of standards, mastery reading tests... if I can do that and, I have kids on IEPs [Individualized Educational Plans]… and, so I have to meet all their needs and their minutes for small group and all that. But, as long as I can do that, then we fit in the fun stuff" (Candace). VE was viewed as an additional or bonus activity above and beyond the curriculum standards and necessary assessments.

DISCUSSION

Over the past five years, awareness of and participation in VE has grown exponentially, enabled by greater access to educational technology, new programs and providers, and more demands on schools to build global and cross-cultural skills and competencies among students. In the wake of educational disruptions caused by COVID-19, there is at the same time increased awareness of the

educational inequities in who has access to VE opportunities. To that end, in the 2021 Stevens Initiative Survey of Virtual Exchange Field, authors concluded with the following:

> While technology opened doors during the pandemic, it also sharpened digital divides and brought to light global inequities. Looking ahead to an altered landscape, it is possible that virtual exchange programs will have an even stronger role to play in addressing some of these shifts, in diversifying teaching and learning, and in enabling students and educators from a range of backgrounds to develop global competencies and to do so in an equitable, accessible, and just way. (p. 13)

Against the growth in awareness in the potential for VE to enable global and cross-cultural exchanges, and the dearth of studies focused on K-12 VE and domestic VE, our study points to the importance of understanding some of the barriers and opportunities to K-12 VE and the experiences of teachers as facilitators of VE experiences.

Our findings suggest that VE often relies on individual teachers as the key stakeholders in enabling access to K-12 VE programming for students. In other words, teachers became the "champions" enabling the availability and access of such a VE program for their own professional development and for the students in their school. However, without greater structural supports made available, such as a system-wide investment in VE programs, VE of this kind ends up as largely an optional program or initiative, disconnected from the core educational focus of a given school. Shifting the emphasis from individual champions toward school- and district-wide support would enable not only greater participation in VE programming but also widen the sphere of its benefits from the individual to the system level. Future research should continue to explore the systemic supports necessary for the facilitation of VE programming, particularly at the K-12 level.

Our findings are also consistent with the extant literature (Fishman & McCarthy, 2005; Delale-O'Connor & Graham, 2019) in suggesting that ongoing professional development is needed to support teachers in approaching conversations about race in VE. Existing district-sponsored professional development programs that focused on topics of diversity and inclusion helped to create a level of comfort for teachers who were previously unsure how to approach conversations on race in the classroom. District support and guidance on 'culturally responsive teaching' can provide teachers with a feeling of security necessary to move from conversations about surface-level difference to more in-depth discussions on race (Gay, 2002). However, as the level of public advocacy for these conversations varied, districts should work to craft a culture of continuous learning on topics such as race not only for teachers and staff, but also for parents, students, and the wider community as well.

In addition, program personnel who are interested in expanding access to VE should conduct outreach to schools and ensure these schools have the technological resources and support needed to adopt VE. As noted in the participant demographics and consistent with demographics of overall program participation and the profession at large, the teachers in this study were a largely

homogenous group of white, female participants. In K-12 settings, teachers serve as the primary facilitators for student participation. Therefore, schools interested in increasing access to VE programs for more diverse populations and facilitating conversations across racial difference should concentrate their efforts on system-wide approaches rather than individual teacher recruitment. According to NCES (2019), schools with larger percentages of underrepresented students tend to have higher percentages of minority teachers. As such, VE outreach should intentionally extend to districts with high percentages of students and teachers of color. As teachers often weighed participation in VE against existing responsibilities such as testing schedules, recruitment should also emphasize the resources and support available from VE program providers like Empatico, embedding these potentially into districts and schools to ensure programming is not presented as a potential burden to the teacher participants.

Across the participants in this study, teachers who found and decided to participate in EAU on their own described more barriers to participating in VE than those teachers in districts who were supporting the work. Not only did teachers in more VE-friendly districts have greater access to technology, they also had school or district-level buy-in from administrators. These findings about the different structural supports available to teachers are particularly significant in the wake of on-going disruptions to K-12 schooling due to COVID-19, and the widespread crisis facing public education (Meckler, 2022), confounded by a growing number of educators leaving the profession and more demands to address the widening academic and social emotional gaps in learners. Therefore, while definitions of VE emphasize it as a form of education that is *facilitated by* educators, facilitation of K-12 VE cannot be left to individual teachers alone. Forms of facilitation must go beyond individual teachers to include district and school supports, professional development, and resources to engage teachers about topics related to cultural diversity, cross-cultural learning, and racial difference are crucial.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports on a study focused on both the opportunities and barriers facing the implementation of domestic K-12 VE in the US context, as well as the perceptions of educators on the access of underrepresented students to these opportunities. Drawing on a qualitative case study of Empatico's EAU program, we elaborate findings on notable barriers to VE facilitation. These include the uneven access to digital technologies across US schools, and the mounting demands that US teachers are facing. We also elaborate on teacher perceptions and experiences in the implementation of a program like the EAU that targets conversations about empathy and race. Given that K-12 VE, both domestic and international, is typically dependent on the willingness and availability of teachers to implement these programs, often outside or in addition to official curriculum, the study overall illustrates the significance of larger system-wide investments and structural supports for domestic VE.

REFERENCES

Baroni, A., Dooly, M., García, P. G., Guth, S., Hauck, M., Helm, F., ... & Rogaten, J. (2019). *Evaluating the impact of virtual exchange on initial teacher education: a European policy experiment*. Research-publishing.net.

Beelen, J., & Jones, E. (2015). Redefining internationalisation at home. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi P. & Scott (Eds.), *The European higher education area: Between critical reflections and future policies* (pp. 67-80). Dordrecht: Springer.

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies.* Sage Publications, Inc.

Delale-O'Connor, L., & Graham, D. L. (2019). Teachers' talk about race and caregiver support: "You can never be too sure about parents". *Urban Education*, *54*(4), 499-534.

Engel, L. C., Maxwell, C., & Yemini, M. (2020). (Eds.). *The machinery of school internationalisation in action: Beyond the established boundaries*. New York: Routledge.

Evolve (n.d.). *What is virtual exchange?* evolve-erasmus.eu. https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/

Fishman, S. M., & McCarthy, L. (2005). Talk about race: When student stories and multicultural curricula are not enough. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(4), 347–364. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320500323948

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53(2)*, 106–116.

Hilliker, S. (2020). Virtual exchange as a study abroad alternative to foster language and culture exchange in TESOL teacher education. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, 23*(4).

Himelfarb, S., & Idriss, S. (2011). *Exchange 2.0*. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/130381/Exchange2.0.pdf

Hseih, H. & Shannon, S.E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277-1288. https://doi.org/10.117/1049732305276687

Kahne, J., Hodgin, E., & Eidman-Aadahl, E. (2016). Redesigning civic education for the digital age: Participatory politics and the pursuit of democratic engagement. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 44*(1), 1-35, DOI: 10.1080/00933104.2015.1132646

Knight, J. (2008). *Higher education in turmoil: The changing world of internationalization.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Maxwell, C., Deppe, U., Kruger, H. H., & Helsper, W. (2018). *Elite education and internationalisation: From the early years to higher education*. Switzerland: The Palgrave Macmillan.

Meckler, L. (2022, January 30). *Public education is facing a crisis of epic proportions.* Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/30/public-education-crisis-enrollment-violence/

O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchanges: State-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 1*, 1-23.

O'Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange: Moving forward into the next decade. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(3), 209–224.

Rhymes, J. and Sessoms-Penny, S. (2021), Transforming K-12 educational leadership through diversity awareness, executive coaching, and closing the digital divide. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 15*: 51-56.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.

Stevens Initiative. (n.d.). *What is virtual exchange?* Stevens Initiative. https://www.stevensinitiative.org/

Stevens Initiative. (2021). *Survey of the field of virtual exchange field report.* Stevens Initiative. https://www.stevensinitiative.org/resource/2021-survey-of-the-virtual-exchange-field-report/

Woodman, T., & Engel, L. C. (in press). Internationalization of the curriculum landscape. In Ahn, E. (ed). *Wisconsin in the world: Internationalization at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.* Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

Yazan, B. (2015). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(2), 134-152. http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss2/12

NICOLE HINSHAW is a recent graduate of the M.A. in Global Communication program at the George Washington University. Her interests lie within public diplomacy and international education, the domestic dimension of public diplomacy, and peacebuilding through international exchange. Email: nhinshaw@gwu.edu

STEPHANIE GONZALEZ is a PhD student in the Education & Inequality Program at the George Washington University. Her research considers how the admission and financial aid processes impact the wellbeing of Latina/o/x students. Email: stephgon@gwu.edu

LAURA ENGEL, PhD is an Associate Professor of International Education and International Affairs at the George Washington University. Her interests focus on global education policy trends in national and sub-national contexts, policy sociology, and inequalities in global learning. Email: lce@gwu.edu