

Global teachers: The long-term effects of an international practicum

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from an international practicum programme for Norwegian student teachers in Namibia. Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences offers a three-month international practicum programme in Namibia. The aim of the programme is to expose students to diversity, develop their global and intercultural competence and to prepare them for teaching in multicultural classrooms in Norway. This paper is the last in a series of publications from a trailing research project following student teachers that had a three-month international practicum in the global south (Wikan and Klein, 2017, Klein and Wikan 2019). In this paper, we examine the long-term impact of the experience. Based on a qualitative study with open-ended questions mailed to 18 former students, we discuss the perceived impact of their experiences both personally and professionally, with a focus on the global teacher aspect. The main finding is that the international practicum has had a significant impact on both personal growth and professional development. They report that they feel competent to teach in a multicultural classroom, teach global issues, have broadened their worldview and global knowledge and have become more critical towards international news due to their own three-month experience in Namibia. In conclusion, they have developed a cultural sensitivity and global perspective in their role as a teacher.

Keywords: International practicum, long-term effects, global teacher

1. Introduction

The consequences of globalisation are a challenge to teacher education. Conflicts, inequality and poverty has fueled international migration, which has resulted in increased ethnic and cultural diversity in schools around the world. Global interdependence is becoming more evident for most people as global migration and climate crises affect daily life. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations have been approved by most countries, and in order to meet these goals, we must educate all learners to take a global perspective.

To meet these SDGs, Norwegian education authorities launched new curricula for teacher education in 2017 and for primary and secondary schools in 2019. The new curricula focus on global issues, democracy, sustainable development and intercultural understanding as integrated components of the teaching of all subjects (<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/f-06-16/id2507752/>). These new curricula meet the need for competence and relevance in an increasingly globalised world. In addition to the new global focus of these curricula, international student mobility is being encouraged in all higher education programmes. The Ministry of Education of Norway is aiming for 50% of students to spend part of their education abroad. International exchange programmes are seen as a means for increasing the global perspectives and intercultural competence of students. These programmes are potentially transformative in nature as participants can gain a better understanding of and sensitivity to differences by living in another country and developing a more ethnorelative perspective. The new frame of reference would be considered more functional when it is more inclusive, differentiating, critically reflective, open to other points of view, and integrative of experience. Transformative learning is the process of change in frame of reference (Bennett, 2004, 2012; Mezirow 1981, 1997). First-hand knowledge and the experience of otherness are critical to the development of intercultural competence and global awareness, which are both necessary competences for teachers in diverse classrooms (Cushner, 2007; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Walters et al., 2009). Nevertheless, “many teachers continue to graduate from preparatory institutions and settle into careers without the requisite competencies to ensure the educational equity that enables all students to attain their personal and professional goals in this global, postmodern world” (Cohen & Mahon, 2009, p. 307).

Many researchers have found that students who take part in international exchange or international practicum programmes develop a more sophisticated worldview, become more interested in exploring other cultures, increase their openness and tolerance towards other cultures and gain a greater understanding of global issues (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; DeGraaf, Slager, Larsen, & Ditta, 2013; Maynes, Allison, & Julien-Schultz, 2012). In addition, these students also report personal benefits, such as increased independence, maturity and confidence, and for student teachers, this personal growth also strengthens their abilities as teachers (Nunan, 2006; Tangen et al, 2017; Wiggins et al., 2007; Wilson 1993).

However, some scholars have questioned the transformative power of exchange programmes (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012; Lou & Bosley, 2012; Vande Berg et al., 2012). They have claimed that being in another country does not automatically make a person interculturally competent (Hammer, 2012). While being exposed to another culture is a necessary condition for students to become interculturally competent, it is insufficient. Some students have learned to appreciate the differences between cultures, opened their minds and increased their acceptance of differences. However, others have returned with a stronger belief in the superiority of their own culture (Klein & Wikan, 2019; Wikan & Klein, 2017). Note that these prior findings were based on data gathered shortly after the student teachers completed their programmes. Therefore, these studies have evaluated short-time effects.

There are few studies on the long-term effects of international mobility (DeGraf, Slager, Larsen, & Ditta, 2013; Nunan, 2006,). Those that have studied the long-term effects have found some lasting personal and professional ones. On the personal level, they have found improved language skills, increased self-esteem and greater interest in international affairs. On the professional level, studies have found an impact on curricular and instructional practices (Hadis, 2005). This article supplement to these studies by analysing the long-term effects of a Norwegian international practicum programmes. The participants that is presently working as teachers took part in a 3-month international practicum programme for student teachers in Namibia. The aim of the programme was to expose students to diversity and to develop their global and intercultural competences so that they are better prepared to be global teachers in the 21st century. They had their practicum in primary and lower secondary schools in a medium-sized town in northern Namibia. In this article, we investigate how the

participants evaluate the value of international practicum after having practiced as teachers for some years. We especially address issues such personal and professional growth, gaining a global perspective and intercultural competence.

2. Literature Review

Global education has many definitions but they all includes both a knowledge dimension and a perspective dimension. Based on the UNESCO definition, Becker (1982) defined global education as an effort to help individual learners see the world as a single and global system and see themselves as a participant in that system. A school that focuses on global education prepares learners to have a worldview for international understanding. Becker emphasised that global education incorporates into the curriculum and educational experiences of each student a knowledge of and empathy for the different cultures of a nation and of the world. Hanvey, as quoted in Burnouf (2004), proposed five dimensions that should be part of global education: perspective consciousness, state-of-the-planet awareness, cross-cultural awareness, and knowledge of global dynamics and an awareness of human choice. Pike and Selby (1995) talked about four dimensions: spatial, temporal, inner and issues. Deardoff (2006) stressed that a global teacher also needs to be interculturally competent. This implies attitudes of openness, respect, curiosity and discovery towards other cultures, sensitivity towards otherness and the recognition of one's own cultural norms and ethnocentricity. Escobido (2017) add to this when he define a global teacher as one that is " a competent teacher who is armed with enough skills, appropriate attitude and universal values to teach...and thinks and acts both locally and globally with worldwide perspectives, right in the communities where he or she is situated" . Global education includes studying human values and beliefs, global systems, problems, history, cross-cultural interaction, and understanding (Merryfield, 1993).

O'Tool (2006) said that in order to prepare student teachers to work in a multicultural context in an increasingly globalised world, they must be taught about both developmental issues and multicultural contexts. That means that economic developmental education and multicultural education are equally important. To educate global teachers, teacher education must therefore incorporate both global and justice dimensions in the education (O'Tool, 2006, p. 99). However, according to Merryfield (2000), while theoretical courses are important, they are not enough to create a global teacher. Lived experience is also

necessary, as “Experience alone does not make a person a multicultural or global educator. It is the interrelationships across identity power and experience that lead to a consciousness of other perspectives and recognition of multiple realities” (Merryfield, 2000, p. 440). This is easier for teachers who themselves belong to underprivileged groups in society. Experiences such as international mobility programmes might help those who belong to the majority population by helping them to change their perspectives and by providing substantial knowledge along with the lived experience of another culture and society (Nunman, 2006).

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative phenomenological long-term effect research. The data of this study were gathered from former student teachers using qualitative methods. To find the former student teachers, we obtained the records that were kept on file on the international practicum program. We sent emails to 30 former student teachers who had taken part in the international practicum program during the period from 2007–2017. We received answers from 18 of them. That gave us a response rate of 60%. All of the respondents were working as teachers in primary schools. Unfortunately, we do not have any information that could help us discuss the skewness of the sample.

We considered the fact that some of the respondents had their experiences in Namibia 10 years ago, while the most recent ones had them just 2 years ago and that this might have some implications for the way in which they answered. While we could not see any systematic connection between the time that had passed and the way that participants answered.

In the questionnaire, we asked the participants open ended questions and focused mainly on professional, personal, intercultural and global dimensions. The questions were as follows:

- How would you describe your personal and professional development as a result of your stay in Namibia?
- Did your stay in Namibia influence your choice to become a teacher?
- How did your stay in Namibia change your view of other cultures and your global awareness?
- How did your stay in Namibia influence your teaching on global and cultural topics?

- Please reflect upon whether your stay in Namibia has made you a more competent teacher in a multicultural classroom.

The material was analysed using general inductive approaches. Each participant's response was analysed based on themes deduced from the literature review, thus the organisation of the material was mainly theoretically derived. The main themes were: 1. Personal and professional growth operationalized as self-esteem, perspective of education and the teacher role and self-efficacy. 2. Gaining a global perspectives, operationalized as new knowledge and broadened perspective of inequality, poverty and injustice. C. Intercultural competence operationalized as ability understand others and to communicate across cultural difference in the classroom. Below, the main findings are presented and structured according to the main following categories. Although these headings are useful for presenting the findings, there were occasional difficulties in organising the findings as the categories overlap. Throughout the presentation, quotations are used to illustrate the respondents' views.

1. Results

1.1. Personal and Professional Growth

All teachers must discover their own roles as teachers. This is a process, and it is obvious that the experience of working as a teacher in Namibia made an impact on this process in the participants. Most of the respondents stated that the stay aided their personal growth, self-esteem and understanding of education in context. Some even claimed that this experience was the reason why they decided to become teachers as they were unsure if it would be the right profession for them despite being third year student teachers.

Personal growth is a complex concept, and it means different things to different people. As examples of personal growth, the respondents mentioned: learning to look after themselves, being patient and having self-understanding. Living away from family and friends can be a frightening and lonely experience; however, it can also provide an opportunity to listen to an inner voice and develop self-understanding, thus discovering new qualities and strengths. Increased self-esteem was an outcome that many participants mentioned because they had learnt how to connect with strangers in an unfamiliar setting, discover how things worked, speak English and live in a different culture. For most, this was a

challenge, but by managing the situation, they found that they could set new goals for themselves and then reach them. This was a new and important personal experience for many of the respondents, and the manner in which it increased self-esteem is illustrated by the following two quotes:

I am more confident and trust my own judgement. I was the type who stayed in the background and let others lead, but that has changed due to my stay in Namibia.

I learned how to fit into an unfamiliar society and culture. It was different from being on vacation. Working at a school meant that I had to adjust and cooperate with people from another culture. My stay in Namibia was the best period of my life. I have no regrets, and I miss it a lot.

Professional development was one rationale for the institution to send these student teachers to Namibia. Many of the participants claimed that their lived experience in the Namibian schools and with Namibian life in general has helped them to obtain a broader perspective on both education and schools. In the Namibian classroom, they met ethnic diversity, poverty and a lack of resources. The student teachers had never experienced classrooms of more than 30 pupils; in Namibia, classes of 40 to 50 are common. In some classrooms, there were not enough chairs or desks, and a lack of learning materials and books was common. There was no functioning ICT. Teaching in an unfamiliar setting with large classes, language challenges and few resources has made the participants more innovative. In the beginning, they did find it problematic to be without the many kinds of teaching materials available to them in Norwegian schools; however, they later discovered that they could find alternative methods for teaching. Many said that they could teach without textbooks. This not only increased their confidence as teachers but also changed their perspectives on what is required to provide effective teaching. Some discovered that the pupils learned even without sophisticated learning materials being available, and they could handle large classes without a teaching assistant. Some used this experience to better appreciate the small class sizes and abundant learning materials available in Norwegian schools. However, this also provided a substantial knowledge of how different educational opportunities are globally. This is an important result as it related to the idea of global teacher as a social justice agent. One respondent said the following:

The stay made me sure that I wanted to become a teacher. I had to teach without any technology or learning materials. I had to work hard to plan and create my lessons. I managed, and I knew that I would like to become a teacher.

By teaching in a Namibian school, I developed as a teacher by reflecting on the differences, and I now understand the importance of context for learning.

The typical Namibian teacher conducts a teacher-led, top-down class with little dialogue, differentiation or focus on motivating learners. The teaching style is mostly authoritarian and teacher centred. The students observe one-way communication: the teacher speaks and the pupils listen and answer. This lack of dialogue caused the Norwegian student teachers to question the outcomes of the lessons as they had been taught in their own education that dialogue is a necessity for learning. Furthermore, differentiation and motivation are key aspects of the teaching ideology of Norwegian schools. For some respondents, this experience led them to have a deeper understanding of the importance of offering special education, inclusion and differentiation.

I have become a better teacher because I am better at adjusting my teaching to individual learners and the class. I learned to handle very diverse classrooms, diverse when it came to learning ability, language and age. For example, I had to work hard to get the Namibian learners to become active in class; they were not used to speaking up. I now use that experience when I come across the same type of classes in Norway.

In general, the participants expressed that they had increased personal and professional self-efficacy as a result of their practicum in Namibia. For some, the experience changed their professional perspective more than others. For example, one participant stated:

The stay in Namibia showed me how much I liked to be part of an international milieu, and that has changed the course of my professional carrier. I want to work in a multicultural classroom and use what I have learned. For instance, I learned techniques to communicate across cultures.

4.2 Gaining a Global Perspective

A global teacher needs to see the world as a single system and understand their own role according to Backer 1982. In order to gain a global perspective one needs knowledge of other countries and cultures. A global perspective is encompassed by two dimensions: a knowledge dimension and a perspective dimension.

Substantial knowledge is a lasting outcome of an international practicum. All of the participants gained knowledge of a developing subtropical African country. For example, their first-hand experience of poverty made it a concrete concept. They experienced how poverty looks, smells and sounds. Moreover, they have seen many of the consequences of poverty. They expressed feeling helpless when coming to understand the deep poverty in which many of their pupils lived and its consequences for their education. For example, some students could only attend school occasionally because they had to work and look after younger siblings as both parents had died and they lived alone in the slums.

A substantial knowledge of other cultures is valuable for a teacher. I am a better teacher of global issues because I have lived and worked with people who live under much different material conditions than we do in Norway. As a teacher, it is important to be good in your subject and have experience with many different factors, and the fact that I had this experience has made me a better teacher of global and multicultural subjects. My travels have influenced my teaching—what I teach and how I teach and which values I convey.

However, participants also found that there were “no automatic connections between happiness and having many things”, as one respondent said. They observed how people could manage with few material possessions, little money or other items, while we in Norway seem to need very many things. The stay in Namibia made the participants feel and understand the differences between Norway and an African country. This added substantially to their knowledge of how different standard of living could be across the world.

Many of the participants said that the substantial knowledge gained from their experience in Namibia has influenced their teaching. Overall, it has had an influence on their choice of themes, teaching international and global concepts more often than they would have without having lived Namibia. In addition, they have many concrete examples from Namibia that they can use to illuminate their lessons which made their teaching more authentic:

I use my personal experience and stories from Namibia when teaching about poverty, inequality and global issues. My learners like that I share this with them and include it in my teaching. For instance, I can talk about secondary poverty and tell them about how some people in Namibia seemed to have strange priorities (when it came to how to spend money). The stay has made an influence on all of my teaching; I focus on global south and global north in my teaching and include aspects of lifelong learning and SDGs. These are all subjects that are also important in Norwegian classrooms.

It is also typical for the participants to follow international news more closely than before, especially the news from Africa. Some have also become more critical of the news from Africa. They have observed how the media portrays events from a Western point of view, and because we have so little knowledge of much of the world, it is difficult to know what is true. Overall, the stay in Namibia made the participants more globally oriented as teachers and developed a more critical approach. The stay in Namibia has not only given them substantial knowledge about Namibia, but in addition, many have continued to add new knowledge and global perspectives on their own.

According to Mesirow (2000), a change in perspectives is difficult without new experiences. One point that seems to have made a lasting impact on the teachers is the magnitude of inequality. While there are poor families and inequality in Norway, Norwegian poverty and inequality cannot compare to that found in other parts of the world. Living in Namibia changed the student teachers' perspectives on the concepts of inequality and poverty. In Norway, the social security system ensures that hunger does not exist and that people have decent homes and enough money to cover basic needs. This is not a global situation, and the teachers saw this for the first time in Namibia. The following is a telling quote:

Inequality in a poor country is so great; some people lived in big houses with a swimming pool, while others lived in container houses in the slums and often shared them with other families. The magnitude of inequality made me see that the inequality in Norway is a different matter altogether.

Many of the participants gained a personal experience of injustice in Namibia. Namibia has a history of apartheid. Until 1990, Namibia was governed as province of South Africa, and this meant that different ethnic groups were

segregated and followed white minority rule. Because they were white and had money, our student teachers found that they belonged to a privileged class. They were invited to places where their black colleagues were not, and they experienced inequality and racism and saw how unfair the world could be. Their experience of having the advantages of being white meant that they could socialise with both white and black people, rich and poor, providing a lasting effect and a knowledge perspective. Moreover, this experience has enabled some of the participants to include a justice dimension in their lessons. Many also received a more complex understanding of the factors that hamper economic development. They saw that internal factors, such as values and culture, not only hamper development, but there are also external factors that must be taken into consideration.

4.3 Intercultural Competence

What is the nature of intercultural competence? We base our understanding on the definition from two of the most influential academics in the field - Bennet (2012) and Deardorff (2004). Bennet's definition "refers to the acquisition of generalizable intercultural competence: that is, competence that can be applied to dealing with cross-cultural contact in general, not just skills useful for dealing with a particular other culture" (Bennet, 2012). Deardorff (2004) highlights that most of the definitions of intercultural competence include more than knowledge of other cultures, since knowledge alone is not enough to constitute intercultural competence. Intercultural competence also involves the development of one's skills and attitudes in successfully interacting with persons of diverse backgrounds. Based on these two definitions and inspired by Hylland Eriksen (2015) we in the present paper will understand intercultural competence as the ability to communicate and collaborate with people whose attitudes, values, skills and knowledge are significantly different from their own.

I am a better teacher in a multicultural classroom. I am sensitive to cultural differences, and that influences my teaching. I try to reach out to immigrant learners and have an understanding of how cultural differences might lead to a misunderstanding. I have a first-hand understanding of the feelings of not being understood. Yes, I can feel it when I discuss things with other teachers. I bring in other perspectives, and often I am better at understanding the parents of

migrant learners. I can see why it is not natural for them to come to parent-teacher meetings or follow up with homework. It is not what they are accustomed to, and some are illiterate. I have developed an empathy and understanding of the situations of immigrant families when they encounter the Norwegian school because I experienced the life that they had before, and I learned how difficult it is to be taught in a language different from your first language. I use this experience when I teach minority learners in Norwegian and social science.

Most of the participants claimed that they had become better qualified to teach in a multicultural and multilingual classroom due to their experience and knowledge gained from Namibia. Their stay opened their minds to differences that might exist between cultures and people. Overall, they broadened their worldview and increased their ability to communicate with people from other cultures.

It is the experience of being the one who stands out, being different and not understanding the rules, culture or language that has led to this increased empathy and willingness to attempt to understand and communicate across cultural differences. Being 'the other' was an experience that made them value the ability to speak, read or watch television in their own language, eat Norwegian food and in general, understand the rules and values of a society. This lived experience helped most teachers to better understand the difficulties that new immigrants face in Norway. The participants could more easily see how immigrant children face a disadvantaged situation in Norwegian classrooms because of both language and cultural differences. The student teachers experienced values and attitudes different from their own and had to deal with ethical dilemmas, for example being a foreign guest in a classroom and being unable to intervene when a teacher administered corporal punishment. Most of the participants said that they felt more competent in understanding and communicating with people from other cultures because of their stay in Namibia. They experienced how very different cultures and people can be but found that people can also be very much alike. The quote below sums this up nicely:

I am a better listener, more interested in learning from others and see the importance of immigrants being valued for their culture and language and the people they are. I learned that from my stay in Africa and from the people I met. The people that helped us, the people that stole from us, those who believed that white people were ATMs and

the people who opened their homes to us. I learned how it felt to be an outsider not understanding the language, and I experienced being a minority person who was very much welcomed—that was a great feeling that I hope to give to my immigrant learners and other newcomers to my country.

The practicum in Namibia changed how many of the teachers viewed and valued other cultures and ways of life. In general, most of them became positive towards and more interested in other cultures. Many have become interested in learning from foreigners and look upon themselves as people that are more tolerant. Some said that their increased understanding and respect for otherness/differences between learners has led to a general interest and respect for diversity.

Perhaps the most important point they learned was to respect others people's ways of living and to acknowledge the value of different perspectives. For example, one participant learned that the Norwegian way of living, culture and norms are not ideals for all. Many people like their own lives and are skeptical towards our way of living. In this teacher's words "it is natural to be ethnocentric—that does not make you a bad person, but remember, the person you are talking to is probably ethnocentric too".

Although the great majority of the participants claimed that their stay in Namibia has made them more open and sensitive towards other cultures and norms, this was not without exception. One teacher claimed to be unsure if the stay had had any impact on his intercultural competence. He said that it was hard to tell if the stay or the new understanding of Namibian culture would be of any value in a multicultural classroom. He said that, while he might have a deeper understanding of other cultures, he could not tell if this understanding was of value as no learners are the same and they all come from many different cultures.

2. Conclusion

For most of the participants, the period abroad in another culture has brought them benefits as teachers in the Norwegian classroom. The international practicum seems to stand out as a special international experience that is distinct from other forms of overseas travel in which some of the respondents have also participated. Personal growth is one of the major positive outcomes.

When it comes to professional development, there were many benefits. Substantial knowledge about the world is one important outcome. Another is a broader perspective and understanding of the world. Increased interest in international news, especially from Africa, is also important, and significantly, many participants have become more critical of the news being reported from Africa. The lived experience from Namibia has also helped many of the participants to become more interculturally competent. An important outcome of their stays in Namibia has been that the teachers feel more competent in teaching diverse classrooms. Due to their greater knowledge and interest in global issues, some participants said that they have placed an emphasis on this in their teaching.

Have these student teachers become global teachers due to their experiences in Namibia? As mentioned earlier, Hanvey proposed five dimensions to global education: perspective consciousness, state-of-the-planet awareness, cross-cultural awareness, knowledge of global dynamics and awareness of human choice.

From our data alone, we cannot conclude that our participants have developed the skills and perspective that a global teacher should have. On the one hand, most of them reported perspective consciousness, increased state-of-the-planet knowledge and cross-cultural awareness. This may imply that they have become more globally oriented as teachers and can prepare learners with a worldview of international understanding. Thus, the teachers who have been in this international practicum programme have increased their competence for teaching in diverse classrooms and with a global perspective. This is not surprising. It is in accordance with what Merryfield (2000) said might be the outcome of international teaching experiences. She said that an experience like an international mobility programme can help those belonging to a majority population change their perspectives by giving them substantial knowledge as well as the lived experience of another culture and society. On the other hand, we do not know the content and perspective of their teaching. They report that they have observed poverty and injustice and have increased their worldview and this have a bearing of what they teach. Furthermore, in their answer they show empathy with the poor and underprivileged that they met in Namibia. Whether or not this means that they have developed an increased understanding of the structures that create underdevelopment, poverty and injustice globally we have little information. In addition, we do not know if their teaching purposely questioning stereotyping of others and add to the pupils understanding of the

complexity of cultures, conflicts and global issues and understanding of global interdependence.

The findings have some implication for teacher education. Sending student teachers for international practicum to the Global South is not enough to develop global teachers. It is important how the institution prepare, follow up and work with the participant when they come home. In their preparation course it is necessary to include intercultural studies, but equally important is development studies, that is studies of economic development theories, World system theories, poverty and inequality. Our argument is supported by Leeman & Ledoux (2003, 2005), who maintain that conscious intercultural and global competence can only be developed when experience is coupled with knowledge and reflection.

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