

# Exploring Novice Teachers' Experiences with Intercultural Curriculum

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**H**EIGHTENED CROSS-CULTURAL MOVEMENT across an increasingly interrelated world landscape has resulted in the rapid development of highly culturally pluralistic populations in the U.S. and Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007; United States Census Bureau, 2002). Likewise, U.S. and Canadian schools are provided with the great responsibility of and opportunity for structuring successful academic environments for amplified numbers of underrepresented and newcomer students. Multiculturalism and diversity are therefore central areas of concentration in education (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). It has also become imperative for educators to meet the needs of diverse student populations via the establishment of culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) curricula.

In addition, discourse within the field of curriculum studies is increasingly infused with deliberations over both pragmatic and philosophical issues and concepts related to globalization (Gough, 2003; Matus & McCarthy, 2003; Smith, 2003). While curriculum inquiry and inquiry into curriculum are incorporating international orientations and perspectives within the field of curriculum studies, teacher education has also become a key focus of curriculum theorizing in relation to the means and ends of schooling (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2008). Consequently, pre-service and in-service teachers are facing mounting expectations to develop transnational notions of curriculum in order to participate in teaching and learning within the context of a global landscape (Bloomfield & McConaghy, 2006; Cushner & Brennan, 2007a). Furthermore, rises in rates of immigration necessitate that teachers gain a broad understanding of the nature of intercultural experiences and build knowledge of cultures and cultures of schooling to establish relevant methods and practices for multicultural classrooms (Schlein, 2006; School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008).

Teachers must make daily decisions that affect the curriculum for diverse learners; however, they may not have knowledge of or experience with multiple cultures and cultures of schooling that is necessary for instruction in multicultural schools. A review of recent research reveals that the majority of North American student teachers come from White, middle class backgrounds (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), which may not be culturally and socially congruent with the pupils in future classrooms. Moreover, although there is a connection between teachers' cultural

identities, their teaching practices, and their abilities to foster accountability toward students from academic and cultural perspectives (Feuerverger, 2005, 2007), many pre-service and in-service educators do not possess familiarity with cultures and cultural norms and expectations for teaching and learning outside of their own personal spheres (Liston & Zeichner, 1996). In turn, student teachers may lack requisite cultural preparation for work with diverse learners (Nieto, 2002). Intercultural teaching placements offer educators an opportunity to broaden their cultural and professional understanding. As such, teaching abroad serves as an effective form of professional development for instruction in culturally diverse school settings and within the wider context of a global world (Cushner & Brennan, 2007a; Schlein, 2007).

In this article, I discuss the findings of an investigation into the professional experiences of four novice Canadian educators, including myself, who became inducted into the teaching profession in either Japan or Hong Kong. Through the presentation and discussion of experiential narratives of cross-cultural teaching, I demonstrate aspects of our intercultural curriculum development and practice. In particular, I highlight examples of the transformative lessons that my co-participants and I learned as a means of creating intercultural curricula and of becoming intercultural teachers. I further deliberate over the potential and tensions of engaging in intercultural teaching and learning with respect to curricular interactions in multicultural North American schools in a postmodern and global world.

## Research Objectives

Within my study, I aimed to investigate the professional development experiences of novice teachers across schools in Japan, Hong Kong, and Canada. I made use of the following research questions to frame my study. 1) What happens to and within novice Canadian teachers as they practice their profession in schools in Northeast Asia? 2) How do teachers make sense of and adapt to foreign curricula and new cultures of schooling? 3) Does intercultural curriculum development and practice develop educators professionally for situations and interactions in multicultural North American schools?

In conducting an inquiry into the experiences and impact of intercultural teaching, my research objectives were to collect novice teachers' experiential narratives of socialization to the teaching profession within foreign countries and systems of education; examine ways teaching abroad impacts educators' practices and perspectives on schooling; and highlight the applications of cross-cultural teaching placements and exchanges for teacher education that is geared toward teaching for diversity.

## Theoretical Framework

My investigation into the curricular experiences of novice teachers across contexts and cultures was guided by the narrative inquiry research tradition of Clandinin and Connelly (2000). This inquiry framework provided me with a theoretical structure for collecting experiential stories of curricular practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, 2000) and for examining teaching experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990) with respect to intercultural school settings. Moreover, I consulted the literature on self-studies in teaching and teacher education (Austin &

Senese, 2004; Berry, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Elijah, 2004) as a means of orienting my inquiry as a self-study with co-participants.

Building on the experiential theoretical scaffold inherent to narrative inquiry, I further made use of theories supporting a pragmatic and particular focus in curriculum research and practice. I incorporated Dewey's (1938) concept of the interrelated nature of education and experience into the theoretical base of my investigation in order to approach intercultural curriculum as the lived experiences of teachers and students both inside and outside of classrooms and schools. In addition, I drew on Schwab's (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) theories of the practical in education as a rationale for exploring the particularities of intercultural situations and interactions among teachers, students, subject matters, and milieus.

Within my study, I also employed as central theoretical resources research on critical pedagogy and educational multiculturalism (Banks & McGee Banks, 2004; Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Nieto, 2002). These bodies of literature aided me in gaining insight into the various cultural facets and the culturally related possibilities of intercultural curriculum. Recent work on international student teaching (Cushner & Brennan, 2007b; Garii, 2008; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Malewski & Phillion, 2009) were also instrumental in shaping my study. Furthermore, my investigation is located between narrative cross-cultural multiculturalism (He, 2003) and narrative multiculturalism (Chan, 2006; Phillion, 2002).

## Methodology

During the data collection phase of my inquiry, I conducted five, 90-minute interviews with my co-participants, Dallas, Catherine, and Anastasia. I also met with each participant on an individual basis for two, 60-minute conversations on literary excerpts about teaching in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Japan. My co-participants further made use of individual journals to respond to eight written arts-based exercises and to provide extended reflections on the selections from the literature on teaching abroad or schooling in various Northeast Asian countries.

In addition, I conducted observation visits at a culturally diverse school in Canada to reorient myself to teaching and learning in the local context. I further immersed myself in school life in the Canadian context in order to seek out potential opportunities for incorporating intercultural curriculum into interactions among students from underrepresented backgrounds and newcomer pupils. As a result of my interactions with my co-participants and the teachers, students, and administrators at the research school in which I was situated, I created autobiographical written response pieces as a form of experiential reflection on intercultural curriculum.

I documented extensive technical and reflective field notes throughout all stages of the inquiry. Following data collection, I examined, in-depth, all interview transcriptions, field notes, journal entries, and autobiographical response writing. I then analyzed all materials for common narrative threads and themes among our storied experiences with intercultural curriculum.

## Data Analysis and Discussion

I present here my co-participants' and my own experiential narratives of educator professional induction while learning about and engaging in intercultural curriculum. Catherine, Dallas, Anastasia, and I were all new teachers when we left Canada for positions in Northeast Asian

schools. I taught English and Cultural Studies at public junior and senior high schools in Osaka City as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. Catherine was also a JET teacher, and she taught English in Japanese public junior high schools for two years in Oita City. She later returned to Japan for an additional two years to conduct educational research. Dallas taught English and Drama for four years at a private Canadian senior high school in Hong Kong, and she spent another four years as a Drama and English teacher at a private international senior high school located in Hong Kong. Anastasia taught English in a private kindergarten in Hong Kong for one year and at a private senior high school in Hong Kong for four years.

Within our varied experiences, our stories illuminate lived classroom scenarios for novice teachers in foreign countries. In this way, our narratives shed light on some of the specific details of teaching abroad for extended periods of time, which may contrast with the situations of pre-service or in-service participants in short-term international teaching placement programs. Through our stories, I illustrate how attending to experiences of teaching in foreign cultures is important for uncovering sites of intercultural curriculum formation, as well as the adoption of intercultural teaching perspectives.

I discuss my co-participants' and my own experiential narratives here in order to demonstrate some of the qualitative features of adapting to, acquiring, and integrating intercultural curriculum knowledge into teaching practices. Our storied experiences of life and teaching in Japanese and Hong Kong schools exemplify how taking part in educator professional development in foreign countries and school cultures may be associated with a process of personal and professional cultural de-centering, whereby the curriculum that is lived out in classrooms is reflective of a combination of curricular approaches and norms and expectations for teaching and learning from the host and native cultures. I outline in this section the ways in which my co-participants and I learned how to become intercultural teachers, including encountering, gaining insight into, and working within novel roles for teachers, new perspectives on schooling, and different expectations for classroom interactions.

Initially, becoming socialized to the teaching profession in new cultures required that my co-participants and I gain a locally meaningful understanding of the role of teachers and of teacher-student relationships. My co-participants and I had to redefine teachers, and in doing so, we also needed to see ourselves and our professional endeavors in new ways. Anastasia describes her discovery of the important status of teachers when she first moved to Hong Kong by stating that "teachers are next to God in China." Likewise, in the following story, Catherine elaborates on her observations of the teacher's role in Japan.

In junior high schools, the teachers seem more as parents. All the way through, they have the same homeroom teacher who does home visits. At the beginning of the year, they spend every day after school visiting kids in their homes and talking with their parents. They do this to see the kids in their home environments and to offer suggestions or to criticize and shape the kids. I think that Japanese teachers feel freer to shape the kids in certain ways, whereas I think parents would be doing more of that here.

In the interview transcription excerpt above, Catherine discusses how she encountered a novel model for teachers at schools in Japan, where educators act as authority figures over students and parents. Catherine's narrative explores the pressure placed on educators in Japan within weighted authoritative roles. Consequently, Catherine further related how she worried about living up to the expectations for being a "good Japanese person" and a "good Japanese teacher"

when she taught in Japan, despite the fact that she is not Japanese. While my co-participants and I needed to adopt different roles as teachers in our schools in Hong Kong or Japan and to comprehend how to work within those roles as foreign teachers, we also had to find new ways to interact with our students. In the following narrative, Catherine describes the approach to teaching that she encountered in Japanese schools.

Teaching was about ways of engaging the kids. They'd have a discussion on math, and they'd work on the math problem, and then they'd come back to it, and the kids knew that you were going back to it and go through the answers. When the class started in the morning, students who were chosen to be homework monitors would go to the front of the class and they would do the corrections of the homework from the night before. Every kid would give their answer. If it was right, they would say something, and then they'd go on to the next. If the answer was wrong, they'd have to talk about it. It was the kids who were leading this. I didn't realize the extent to which it was controlled by the kids until one day the teacher didn't come. The kids just carried on, and they did it until the teacher came.

Catherine's story displays how teaching in Japan involves encouraging students to take ownership of their own learning rather than having teachers act as curricular disciplinarians. Moreover, this story exhibits a cultural approach to expectations for teaching and learning that may be novel for educators from the North American context, whereby students are expected to persevere in their lessons until correct answers are achieved instead of attributing achievement to specific academic or intellectual attributes. Although my co-participants and I needed to adapt into cultures of schooling that place students at the center of their own curricular efforts, Anastasia relates in the following how we were also surprised by the purpose and quality of teacher feedback in Northeast Asia.

One of the Chinese teachers went to Taiwan and she came back with all these *chops*, which is what they call stamps, and they said things like, "You are lazy," "You are stupid," and "Incomplete." The Western teachers killed ourselves laughing, thinking, "Oh, my God. You can't use those in class." We were telling the kids what a good job they were doing, even if you were thinking they were idiots in your head. The Chinese teachers thought they were fantastic stamps. If a student is an idiot, they felt they should tell the kid he is an idiot and not hide it.

In the story above, Anastasia highlights variations between Western and Chinese approaches to feedback and encouragement regarding student work that she observed at her school in Hong Kong. This narrative further exemplifies some of the cultural differences between North American schooling and the educational landscapes into which each of us eventually adapted and became acculturated. We came to see over time that teacher feedback was related to both classroom management techniques and moral training in Hong Kong and Japan. I recall how Japanese colleagues with whom I team-taught would cry out "mistake" every time that students made errors in their work. This served the dual purpose of shaming students so that they would try harder with their academic efforts so as to avoid making further mistakes while ensuring that they stayed focused during lessons. These concepts are connected to the cultural notion of saving face, which Dallas discusses in the next narrative.

As soon as my students at my first school in Hong Kong would see me and know that a question is coming, all their eyes would go down. There were very little discipline problems, but to say anything was connected to saving face. The shame could come out in different ways, whether it's an angry reaction back to you or whatever. Definitely face was a big thing. I can't even put a finger on it, but I would say I probably learned very quickly how to deal with it and to do things differently.

Saving face is a tacit feature of teaching and learning in Japan and Hong Kong, and we needed to learn through classroom interactions how to acknowledge the cultural concept of saving face within lesson plans and classroom management techniques. As my co-participants and I became more cognizant over time of the significant impact of this cultural feature, we attempted to discover ways to be mindful of face via the modification of our teaching methods and practices.

Although all of the facets of education that I discuss above are a part of the curriculum that each of us experienced in Hong Kong or Japan, Catherine and I also needed to understand how to work within a standardized curriculum in order to teach in the Japanese public school system. This often involved not only following specific teaching guidelines but also group lesson planning with all teachers in the English department as a means of creating identical lesson plans and teaching materials. Dallas and Anastasia taught in private schools in Hong Kong; nevertheless, my co-participants and I all needed to comprehend specific behavioral and curricular expectations for teachers in Northeast Asian schools to become successful teachers in that context and to gain the professional respect of colleagues. Anastasia discusses below her frustration in her efforts to link her personal and professional characteristics from the Canadian context to the culture of schooling in Hong Kong.

Every time I tried to be creative with my teaching, I got in trouble. I'm not messy, but if kids are doing art, I put the supplies on the table and say, "Go." Apparently, you are not allowed to do that in a disorganized fashion, so my Chinese teaching partner and boss got upset with me more than once. That ticked me off.

Anastasia's narrative explores her experiences of bumping up against a new culture of schooling. Although we all initially reacted to expectations for conformity by giving up our own instincts as Canadian teachers, I describe below how through learning about Japanese and Hong Kong cultures and cultures of schooling, we each recognized ways to create intercultural curricular spaces within our classrooms.

When I started teaching in Japan, I felt forced to take on teacher-centered instruction and military drilling. Pretty much it was all drilling and practicing. I started to follow the Japanese methods that the other teachers at my schools in Japan were using during my second term as a JET teacher. I eventually learned how to adapt into that, and I was able to incorporate my ideas within the Japanese system. I understood how structured the Japanese educational system was, and I was able to realize that I could make changes here and there. I tried to make lessons that had more group work, and that were more cooperative and creative, and I started to bring in more stuff where I was becoming less of a teacher-centered instructor and allowing the students to have more power. My Japanese

team teachers would be floored by it and say, 'No. The students don't have opinions. They can't say that.' I'd have to fight them that of course they have opinions. They'd say, 'My students are very shy, and they won't speak.' I'd reply that they would have no choice, and they would just have fun and do it. I was able to push the boundaries.

Dallas, Catherine, Anastasia, and I were all personally and professionally impacted by foreign teaching via our experiences with crossing cultures and our acquisition of and acculturation into new bodies of cultural knowledge. Teaching at the cultural boundaries of schooling in Japan and Hong Kong enabled us to develop intercultural teaching methods and practices, as well as to cultivate perspectives on teaching and learning that incorporate different cultural models. In the following narrative, Anastasia considers one of the main ways intercultural teaching impacted her perspective on curriculum theory and practice for local, multicultural schools.

I think that we have to analyze the terms that we use and the teaching fads that come in and out so quickly before we decide whether to keep them or throw them out. I have learned to be more critical of teaching methods and practices. I have also learned to be more open to what is out there.

Anastasia states that although the teaching methods that she observed at her schools in Hong Kong and those which she made use of with her students in Hong Kong may be different from those commonly employed in North America, she believes that some of the differences may actually be beneficial for fostering multicultural instruction via globalized teaching efforts. Furthermore, engaging in the experience of practicing intercultural curriculum across the contexts of Hong Kong and Canada enabled Anastasia to question and think about North American ways of teaching and learning and to remain willing to try out innovative professional practices or teaching methods from cultures of schooling outside of North America.

Overall, the findings of my inquiry display how experiences with professional practice abroad provide teachers with an embodied and shifting cultural understanding of teachers and students. As a result, my study also indicates a connection between pragmatic and philosophical perceptions of cultural curricular engagement and successful curricular interactions among the many students from underrepresented backgrounds and newcomer students in North American schools. Nevertheless, my co-participants' and my own stories of intercultural curriculum also illuminate existing tensions related to employing intercultural curriculum knowledge and culturally hybridized teaching methods and practices. As Catherine, Dallas, and Anastasia related to me the ways in which they felt that teaching abroad had helped to prepare them for schooling in the local, multicultural setting, I wondered about why my own experiences as a teacher in Japan had left me feeling deficient in appropriate curriculum knowledge. After much reflection, I scripted the following autobiographical response piece. The story that I relate below highlights the lessons on curriculum that I learned during my pre-service teacher education program regarding the borders of acceptable knowledge.

I studied to be an English as a Second Language specialist for the elementary and secondary levels of instruction. This program attracted many potential teachers who wanted to travel and practice teaching in foreign contexts, as well as people who had experienced intercultural teaching and desired to become certified teachers. I remember sitting in pedagogy classes and listening to a group of students who always talked about

their teaching experiences in Asia. They often raised their hands to contradict the professor, providing alternate teaching and learning models, strategies, and examples from the Asian landscape. The professor was always polite, yet dismissive of these students. I am ashamed to admit that my friend Shelley and I would listen to the commentary from the teacher-returnees and roll our eyes, whispering to each other that we are not in Asia, and that we do not care about foreign teaching experiences as they would not help us to become better teachers in Canadian classrooms.

Over the years, I often think about that group of students who had experienced teaching in intercultural situations. I cannot help but hear their words echo in my head every time that I start a sentence with the magic words *in Japan*. I immediately sense that those around me are rolling their eyes with boredom, in accompaniment to their belief that teaching in Asia is disconnected to teaching in Canada. Of course, having occupied the position of the other enables me to gain a broader sense of perspective, but I have struggled both within myself and with others with a newfound sense of conviction in the deep interconnection between cross-cultural teaching experiences and teaching in multicultural environments in the context of globalization.

In my autobiographical response writing, I uncover some of the messages that I received as a student teacher with respect to intercultural curriculum. Namely, I subconsciously attained a narrow vision of curriculum that was either acultural or culturally discrete. Although my own encounters with culturally diverse students upon my reentry to Canada revealed to me the benefits of my knowledge of different cultural models for curriculum, I further sought professional mainstream acknowledgement. In this way, my story indicates some of the potential difficulties that may exist in addressing cross-cultural issues in a post-modern world, whereby teacher education programs may face both challenges and opportunities to aid potential teachers in uncovering their own multiple identities in preparation for the reality of teaching students in diverse classrooms in an increasingly globalized world.

In addition, Catherine contemplates tensions between intercultural curriculum practices and aims for national socialization. In the story below, she questions the applicability of Japanese teaching methods and practices, and perhaps intercultural curriculum knowledge, for other school systems.

With the elementary kids in Japan, they were training kids to work in groups and to be accommodating, because that's what they are going to be doing their whole lives. Their society is set up that way, so there is a good reason to do it that way. But if you move it to another context where it's not like that, it might not work. Even if it does, what are you trying to get at? Are you trying to produce a bunch of kids that will work well together when the rest of society doesn't work that way?

Catherine's story highlights the fact that many aspects of teaching and learning are related to cultures as well as cultures of schooling. For this reason, intercultural curriculum knowledge may not translate easily to other contexts. Accordingly, within Catherine's comment, she is searching for the limits of intercultural curricular engagement while indirectly questioning the potential usefulness of her experiences as a teacher in Japan for Canadian students and classrooms.



The stories that I discuss above emphasize some of the key elements of crossing cultures and professional environments for teachers. Through our stories, my co-participants and I illustrate how we adapted to teaching in new countries and systems of education, as well as the personal and social tensions that we experienced as we attempted to engage in intercultural curriculum. While we were teachers in Japan or Hong Kong, we did not simply take on local curricular practices and culturally related norms and expectations for teaching and learning. Instead, we strove to understand the particulars of teachers, students, and schooling within our new settings. Additionally, our narratives exemplify how we struggled to find personal and professional common ground in order to become successful educators in Northeast Asia. This resulted in the formulation of an intermingling of ways of approaching learning from a hybridized Canadian and Japanese or Hong Kong vantage.

Moreover, my co-participants' and my own narratives of reentry to the Canadian context underscore some of the potential tensions that may be involved in incorporating such intercultural curricular knowledge and practices into local classrooms. Our stories thus bring to light questions regarding aims for national educational socialization and the intricacies of globalization in education. As such, this study makes contributions to the literature on cultural "borderlands" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1997) and on the construction of in-between identities (He, 2005). My co-participants and I perceive that we emerged from our experiences in Northeast Asia as intercultural teachers and global citizens. Despite the tensions that we experienced upon our respective reentries to Canada and Canadian schooling, we became cognizant of ways in which teaching abroad had shaped our professional practices and our perspectives on teaching and learning, leading toward ameliorated curricular engagement among diverse learners.

### Educational Significance

Within this article, I address Banks' (1998) suggestion for teacher education programs to select student teachers in accordance with their personal cultural knowledge and experience. I illustrate via the experiential narratives of intercultural curricular engagement throughout this article how teaching abroad provides educators with first-hand knowledge of life and education in different cultures. Such professional encounters result in expanding teachers' comprehension of cultural notions related to teaching and learning that may be directly employed in working with diverse learners and recently immigrated students in North American schools. The findings of my study display that while international curriculum experiences enhance teachers' repertoire of curricular methods and practices, this form of teacher professional development also leads to a more global-minded approach to curriculum. In this way, I demonstrate in this article the potential of intercultural curriculum practice for preparing teachers of all backgrounds to work in culturally diverse schools and within the context of increasingly global societies.

As well, there is a need for greater examination into the connections between the field of curriculum studies and the fields of teaching and teacher education. Such theorizing is important as a means of making curriculum studies more relevant to teachers while rendering a practical focus within curriculum theory (Connelly, He, Phillion, & Schlein, 2008). This study is important as an example of curriculum and teacher education inquiry that is rooted in classroom life. Furthermore, this investigation presents teaching abroad as an effectual means of accounting for cross-cultural considerations across curriculum studies, teaching, and teacher education.

In addition, there is a paucity of research on the implications and applications of intercultural teaching for educating diverse learners. There are even fewer experiential studies on intercultural curriculum. Significantly, in attending to the experiences of novice teachers in intercultural professional situations, I highlight the specific ways that educators may be influenced via teaching abroad. Furthermore, I exemplify the use of new teachers' stories of initiation to the teaching profession as an important resource for informing teaching and teacher education. As such, this article contributes to the literature on curriculum, teacher education, educator induction and development, multicultural education, and educational globalization.

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