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# Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of International Practicum Experiences

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The following appendices are available in a separate file in English only from [heqco.ca](http://heqco.ca):

- Appendix A: Application Motivating Questions
- Appendix B: Participation Tracking
- Appendix C: Interview Questions
- Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

## Executive Summary

This executive summary includes information about the context, research questions, methods and findings related to international teaching practicum placements of teacher candidates in a pre-service concurrent education program in southern Ontario.

### Context

This research features an alternative teaching practicum placement where teacher candidates voluntarily teach abroad in either Kenya or Italy. Teacher candidates in this study are enrolled in a pre-service concurrent education program in southern Ontario. This five-year program requires teacher candidates to take courses related to their undergraduate Bachelor of Arts degree while pursuing their Bachelor of Education degree. In the first three years of the program, one day each week is devoted to participating in a teaching practicum placement where teacher candidates receive feedback from an associate teacher and a faculty advisor. In the fifth year of this program, teacher candidates complete two block placements in school settings. In the fourth year of the program, teacher candidates may apply to participate in an international placement that takes place in either Kenya or Italy as an alternative practicum placement. There is a high participation rate among teacher candidates on this campus, with approximately 30% of the eligible program population applying and successfully completing the process to attend one of the international teaching practicum placements. Pre-departure information sessions are provided by the faculty facilitators who organize and accompany the trip. While participating in this international teaching practicum placement, teacher candidates are also involved in cultural experiences such as local tours and community development projects. During their time spent abroad, teacher candidates are asked to keep a journal of their thoughts, ideas and questions in response to their teaching experiences.

### Research Questions

This research sought to answer and elaborate on two critical research questions:

- *How does the international teaching practicum promote the professional growth of teacher candidates?*
- *What are the benefits and challenges associated with this experience?*

### Methods

Prior to departure, a research assistant informed all teacher candidates who were accepted to participate in the international teaching practicum placements about this study and described the requirements and commitments of the study. Teacher candidates were asked to consider volunteering to be part of the study and, upon indicating a desire to participate, they were asked to provide ethical consent with the understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any point. To address the research questions of this study, a triangulation of data collection techniques was used. Upon return from their international teaching practicum placement, teacher candidates who agreed to be in this study were asked to submit a summation of their journal entries, to participate in a focus group and to participate in a one-on-one interview. Summations were collected by a research assistant who removed any identifiers from the documents and then coded each summation independently. As well, one-on-one and focus group interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed before being coded using open coding techniques.

### Summary of Findings

After coding and analyzing data collected from the three sources, four overarching themes emerged. These

related to the individual experience of each participant in terms of their role as a teacher and as a global citizen, as well as to reflection on the international teaching practicum placement as a program. The themes that emerged in this study were: (a) professional growth; (b) cultural and community connectedness; (c) awareness of opportunities; and (d) practical considerations.

The findings from this study show that many advantages are gained from participating in an international teaching practicum placement beyond those associated with traditional opportunities for classroom instruction. Within the four overarching themes identified, there is widespread evidence to support the benefits and advantages of participating in an international teaching practicum placement, regardless of the destination country. For example, within *professional growth*, teacher candidates in this study were interested in their role as a teacher and how to improve their teaching abilities when faced with a different school system, varying educational values and widespread language barriers.

Furthermore, within the theme of *cultural and community connectedness*, both planned and incidental cultural experiences were reported as beneficial by the teacher candidates. Much of the current literature does not mention the need for experiences outside of the teaching practicum placement, referring instead to the experiences that come directly from teaching and living in a new country. The innovative international practicum model described in this study offered experiences such as visiting the earthquake sites in L'Aquila and building schools in various regions of Kenya which had an important impact on the global awareness of teacher candidates both within their role of "teacher" and outside that role in everyday life. Although cultural experiences may happen incidentally when participating in an international teaching practicum, building them into the actual program can help to ensure that goals of promoting cultural and community connectedness are supported and achieved. This study recognized that teacher candidates view their participation in an international teaching practicum as important to their development as an educator and to forming a deeper *awareness of opportunities*, for global experiences. Participants reported that they gained greater clarity of their future career and employment options.

This international teaching practicum placement is an innovative model combining such elements as teaching abroad, team teaching, cultural experiences, exposure to curriculum diversity and the opportunity for second language instruction. The fourth theme of *practical considerations* indicates that teacher candidates valued the availability of faculty facilitators and the preparation offered prior to the trips. They commented on such practical considerations as the timing, schedules and language preparation that would be ideal for such international experiences. Recommendations are provided for further implementation and enhancement of international practicum models in teacher education programs.

## Introduction

This study examined the experiences of teacher candidates who participated in an international practicum placement facilitated by faculty members. Teacher candidates in a concurrent education program in southern Ontario had the option of participating in an international teaching practicum placement in either Italy or Kenya. The practicum placements were focused on providing candidates with the opportunity for international teaching experience coupled with relevant cultural experiences. The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the motivation for attending these placements, the previous experiences abroad which contributed to the practicum experience, and the new learning or understandings gained as a result of this experience. As well, researchers were interested in uncovering the benefits and challenges associated with international teaching practicum placements from the teacher candidates' perspectives.

To gain this understanding, two main research questions guided the entire study: (a) *How does the international teaching practicum promote the professional growth of teacher candidates?* and (b) *What are the benefits and challenges associated with this experience?*

Upon return from the practicum placements, teacher candidates were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews, a focus group interview, and to submit a one-page summation of their experience based on journals they kept during their time spent abroad. Data collected from participants was coded and analyzed in order to answer the research questions and to gain key insights into the effects of international teaching practicum placements on teacher candidates.

## Background

The concurrent education program described in this study requires teacher candidates to complete five years of teacher education while also completing a bachelor's degree. In each year of the program, teacher candidates attend classes relating to both their undergraduate bachelor's degree and their Bachelor of Education degree. In the first three years of the program, one day each week is devoted to a practice teaching practicum placement, which involves an increased teaching and planning load each year, as well as several assessments and evaluations. In the fifth year of study teacher candidates complete block placements instead of weekly placements in schools. In the fourth of the program, teacher candidates may choose an international placement as one of their block placements. They are evaluated on their teaching and co-teaching abilities by a supervisor who also attends the international teaching practicum placement.

## Literature Review

International teaching placements are relatively new to teacher education programs in Canada. They did not appear until the 1980s (McKay & Montgomery, 1995) and even recently there have been issues surrounding uptake of programs that are available to teacher candidates (Kissock & Richardson, 2010). It is desirable for uptake to increase within faculties of education because the benefits of participating in international teaching practicum placements are widely noted (Bryan & Sprague, 1997; Clement & Otlaw, 2002; Cushner, 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Stachowski & Chleb, 1998; Stachowski, Richardson & Henderson, 2003; Stachowski & Visconti, 1997). For example, Cushner (2007) explains:

The experience abroad, regardless of the level at which it takes place, offers the individual a unique opportunity for intercultural development as it involves both physical and

psychological transitions that engage the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. And this experience occurs twice—once during entry into the host culture and then again upon reentry into the home culture. (p. 29)

Within the context of international teaching practicums, there are a variety of different experiences that can be implemented. According to Quezada (2004), three models of international teaching experiences currently exist. These include the tourist approach, where students take a period of time to study in a new country; the internationalization of the curriculum approach, where students remain at their regular campus but the institution offers a curriculum that is rich in diversity and international ideas; and a complete immersion approach, where teacher candidates teach in a new country while also engaging with the local community. These models differ in that the tourist approach involves travel abroad but does not include experiences to integrate with the local community or time to learn about another culture. The internationalization of the curriculum approach attempts to fill this void by offering a curriculum that is rich in objective information about other cultures and communities, but it lacks the actual experience of travelling to various destinations to experience first-hand what life and teaching is like around the world. The final model, complete immersion, combines the advantages of the tourist approach with the rich background understandings of the internationalization approach: teacher candidates receive information about a destination country, travel to the destination country and engage in community activities and cultural experiences while completing their practice teaching practicum placement. In the complete immersion approach, teacher candidates experience life-as-teacher and life-as-community-member at the same time.

Although a multitude of benefits can be derived from international teaching practicums, Kissock and Richardson (2010) and Kelly (2004) note that few teacher candidates choose to take part in these teaching practicums. This is concerning because many students in today's classrooms may benefit from having a teacher who has experienced an international teaching practicum placement. Teachers who have participated in an international teaching practicum placement are less likely to form judgments about students based on stereotypes and preconceived notions about particular cultures (Dantas, 2007; Willard-Holt, 2001). Taking part in an international teaching practicum can increase the amount of global education and awareness that teachers incorporate into their classrooms: ". . . one reason for the lack of attention to international education in our schools is that our teachers have not been prepared to teach students about other nations, regions, and peoples" (Kelly, 2004, p. 219). Furthermore, Kelly explains, "Preservice preparation programs and inservice professional development initiatives have not adequately responded to the realities of today's globalized world" (2004, p. 219). Here, it is clear that teacher education programs need to respond to the increasingly globalized world, and one way to do this is through international teaching practicum placements. Alfaro and Quezada (2010) also recognize this need for teachers to be aware of and responsive to a globalized world, noting that "providing a pathway for practicing teachers to globalize their perspective and approach to teaching offers a foundation for new professional development pedagogies of the future" (p. 57). Furthermore, Kissock and Richardson (2010) explain, "We fail in fulfilling our responsibilities if we focus on preparing teachers to meet present needs of schools in our local/regional communities and do not open the world of education to pre- and in-service teachers" (p. 96). These comments are grounded in the notion that, beyond faculties of education offering international teaching practicums as a mere act of generosity in providing a novel opportunity, they actually have a *responsibility* to teacher candidates to provide these experiences and to ensure that they are valuable for facilitating global awareness.

While the tourist approach (Quezada, 2004) does exist, one study of teacher candidates who took part in international teaching practicum placements notes that the goals and motives of teacher candidates went far beyond basic tourism. According to Cantalini-Williams and Tessaro (2011):

Teacher candidates were also very focused on the benefits of actually teaching in the schools and consistently reported on the desire to be immersed and to teach as much as possible to reap the maximum benefits from the experience. (p. 58)



Additionally, locating the international teaching practicum in a community can enhance the experiences of teacher candidates in far more significant ways. For example, Stachowski, Bodle and Morrin (2008) explain that having a service component within the local community during an international teaching practicum placement may help teacher candidates become more fully immersed into the community, and thus in experiencing several positive outcomes such as building community connections, contributing to a broader worldview and informing classroom practice. Based on findings from these studies, it becomes clear that many positive benefits can ensue from participating in an international teaching practicum placement and that these benefits reach beyond the individual teaching candidate.

Cushner (2007) explains that international practicum experience among teacher candidates provides intense benefits beyond what standard teacher preparation programs are able to provide:

Although a variety of these undoubtedly offer benefits to pre-service teachers, few of these strategies have the ability to impact the interpersonal dimension better than participation in a sustained, direct intercultural immersion experience like that which occurs during overseas student teaching. (p. 28)

Interpersonal dimensions of pre-service teachers (teacher candidates) do not only manifest inside the classroom but are also displayed and utilized in everyday life.

According to Stachowski and Sparks (2007), there are five factors that need to be considered in order for teacher candidates to make meaningful gains during their international teaching practicum placement. These include (1) being prepared, (2) participating in practice teaching in one's home country prior to departure, (3) participating on an individual level without faculty or peer support and supervision, (4) having structure and focus with clear expectations and responsibilities, and (5) working with existing programs to create a positive collaborative effort in developing international teaching practicum placements. Cantalini-Williams and Tessaro (2011) argue, however, that faculty support is actually critical to a positive international teaching practicum placement experience and that the role of the faculty supervisor is one that needs to be taken seriously and utilized in an effective way. Moreover, Crossley and Watson (2006) noted that partaking in an international teaching practicum placement might actually benefit the faculty advisor as well, rather than simply benefitting teacher candidates. There is potential here for a cycle to form in which faculty advisors gain insights to inform their practice from their participation in facilitating international teaching practicums, and these insights are brought back to the teacher education institution where they could be beneficial to other teacher candidates who learn from these faculty members. As with any initiative that has been implemented, practical issues must be considered and continually evaluated in order to promote uptake and increase effectiveness.

When taken in sum, the literature regarding international teaching practicum experiences offers wide support for the utilization of these experiences in teacher education programs. The benefits of participating in these programs extend beyond critically developing the teacher to developing the whole person through gains in interpersonal skills (Cushner, 2007). Furthermore, the literature offers some practical considerations for conducting effective international teaching experiences, although there is disagreement regarding the role of the faculty advisor and whether or not her or his presence is beneficial. Kisson and Richardson (2010) offer appropriate and urgent concluding remarks about the benefits of international teaching practicum placements, suggesting that "participation in living/learning/teaching experiences through study abroad, international/cross-cultural student teaching or a record of life experience in different educational settings must be required of all prospective educators" (p. 99).

Current gaps in the literature surrounding international teaching practicum placements involve a lack of information about these placements as a way to prepare teacher candidates for potential future employment. These placements offer them a chance to experience teaching in another country, so there is merit in understanding whether or not this influences teacher candidates' future desire to teach abroad or to remain as a teacher in their home country. Furthermore, literature regarding international teaching practicum placements

often involves individual experiences rather than group travel and team teaching in a supervised environment, as is the case with this study. Finally, current research does well to describe the positive benefits associated with international teaching practicum placements; however, it does not consistently explain how these benefits are derived.

## Research Questions

Teacher candidates in this study have travelled to their destination country with a supervised group to participate in team teaching and co-planning. Teacher candidates were asked about their experiences in these conditions, their future employment preferences, and how and why they believe the experience was beneficial or not.

This research sought to answer and elaborate on two critical research questions:

- *How does the international teaching practicum promote the professional growth of teacher candidates?*
- *What are the benefits and challenges associated with this experience?*

It is important to understand how professional growth is promoted within these international teaching practicum placements because placements in this study differ from the “tourist approach” (Quezada, 2004); rather than simply providing a new place to study, the placements involved in this project act as a practicum placement for teacher candidates to complete their mandatory practice teaching hours and requirements. Furthermore, it is important to understand the benefits and challenges associated with the international teaching practicum placement in order to improve programming and policy. It is essential that every effort is made to offer as rich an experience as possible to interested teacher candidates, and this study strives to discern elements affecting the potential benefits of an international experience.

## Methodology

This section will discuss the study design used in this research project and will present an overview of the research participants. Descriptions of the data sources used to collect information will also be provided, as will an outline of the steps taken to analyze the data. Finally, an explanation of the limitations of this study is included.

### Study Design

This study is based on the understanding that international practicum placements are beneficial to teacher candidates (Bryan & Sprague, 1997; Clement & Otlaw, 2002; Cushner, 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2002, 1997; Stachowski & Chleb, 1998; Stachowski, Richardson & Henderson, 2003; Stachowski & Visconti, 1997). In order to maximize the benefits of international teaching practicum placements for teacher candidates, this study aims to gain an understanding of what specific benefits related to professional growth exist in this particular international practicum placement, as well as the overall benefits and challenges that teacher candidates experience.

This study is qualitative in nature and uses data from three main sources in a phenomenological approach. According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), the phenomenological approach involves the use of thick description and close analysis of lived experiences to understand how meaning is created through perceptions. All sources include self-reported information, allowing participants the freedom to discuss issues that are related

to their specific situation. Because there were two destination countries involved in this international teaching practicum placement, and because teacher candidates in this study all had different previous experiences with travel and international teaching or related activities, it was important to include opportunities to explain context. Using a triangulation of data sources allows for a more thorough analysis to take place so that findings are rich and well supported (Creswell, 2012). In this study, a triangulation of data was necessary given that the experience being described by research participants (teacher candidates) was complex and took place over an extended period of time (two to three weeks, plus preparations prior to the experience and re-adjustment periods after the experience).

## Participants

Participants in this study were all teacher candidates in their fourth year of a five-year concurrent education program. All participants were female. Due to the types of teacher education programs available at this particular university, all participants were either studying primary/junior education (Kindergarten to Grade 6) or junior/intermediate education (Grades 4 to 10). Research assistants informed participants about this study during preparation meetings and via email, without the presence of the faculty facilitator. A total of 15 teacher candidates from the 2010-2011 cohort of the concurrent education program agreed to participate in this study.

All teacher candidates wanting to participate in an international practicum placement were expected to apply to their desired international teaching practicum destination. Applicants were accepted into the international teaching program, provided they maintained the required grade point average expectations for the concurrent program, had received a passing grade on their previous practicum placements in schools and demonstrated a commitment to the international experience on their application. As part of the application process, teacher candidates were first required to submit information through an online registration form and were then required to provide responses to questions regarding their motivations for pursuing an international teaching practicum placement (see Appendix A).

Teacher candidates were asked to consider volunteering to be part of the study and, upon indicating a desire to participate, they were asked to provide informed consent with the understanding that they could resign from the study at any point. The faculty facilitators were unaware of which students had agreed to participate in the study. Of the 15 teacher candidates who participated in this study, 11 completed interviews, 8 completed the focus group interview and 11 submitted their journal summations. All data submitted were used in the analysis. Below is a chart outlining the participation frequencies for each data source. Tracking was also maintained to determine which participants provided data for each data source (see Appendix B).

**Table 1: International Teaching Practicum Placement Participation Totals and Percentages**

Total number of teacher candidates in concurrent education program 2010-2011: 128					
Total number of teacher candidates participating in practicum placement (Italy)	20	Total number of teacher candidates who participated in research study (Italy)	10	Participation percentage within teaching group	50%
Total number of teacher candidates participating in practicum placement (Kenya)	16	Total number of teacher candidates who participated in research study (Kenya)	5	Participation percentage within teaching group	30.2%
Total international practicum research participation as percentage of international practicum teacher candidate participants: 41.67%					
Total international practicum participation as percentage of total concurrent education program population: 28.13%					
Total international practicum research participation as percentage of total concurrent education program population: 11.72%					

**Table 2: Group Participation Frequencies**

Italy International Practicum Placement Group Participation Frequencies	One-on-one interview	7
	Focus group	7
	Summation	9
	Total participants	n=10
Kenya International Practicum Placement Group Participation Frequencies	One-on-one interview	4
	Focus group	1
	Summation	2
	Total participants	n=5
Overall International Practicum Placement Group Participation Frequencies	One-on-one interview	11
	Focus group	8
	Summation	11
	Total participants	n=15

## Data Sources

This study utilized a triangulation of data sources (Creswell, 2012) to provide a more in-depth understanding of international practicum placements. Data sources included one-on-one interviews with teacher candidates upon return from their placements, a focus group interview conducted with several study participants, and a one-page summation of the journals that each participant maintained while engaged in their international teaching practicum placement.

A research assistant conducted the one-on-one interviews for this study. Interviews were based on a set of pre-determined questions (see Appendix C), although participants were encouraged to elaborate on their answers and provide additional information as they deemed necessary. The interview questions were related to the overall research questions and sought to gain insights into the professional growth of participants as well as the benefits and challenges that each participant experienced. After receiving permission from participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

The lead researchers, with the help of a research assistant, conducted the focus group session using a predetermined list of broad open-ended questions (see Appendix D). Participants from both international practicum placement destinations were present at the focus group. This focus group provided perspectives from seven participants who travelled to Italy to complete their international teaching practicum placements; however, only one participant who attended the Kenya placement was available to provide insights during the focus group session. Again, all questions and topics discussed in the focus group were related to professional growth, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with the international practicum placement.

Teacher candidates in both the international Kenya and Italy practicum placement groups were required to keep a journal of their thoughts, ideas and questions related to their experiences while in their destination countries as a component of their practice teaching. Upon return to Canada, those who agreed to participate in this study were asked to write and submit a one-page summation of their journal to the research assistant for analysis. Original journal entries were not available for use as a data source as they were considered to be personal property. There were no restrictions on what this summation should include other than that it had to be based on the previous journal entries that each teacher candidate had recorded. Summations were coded and analyzed in order to report key emerging themes and patterns.

## Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis of data sources was a multistep process and typically followed the same pattern for each source. To begin, one-on-one interviews were transcribed and these transcriptions were read and reviewed several times to gain familiarity with the content. Transcripts were then coded using techniques described by Creswell (2012). Coding was repeated with transcripts to note any missing information and to promote consistency in language and idea construct. Codes were clustered categorically, which provided the basis for themes to emerge. Once a set of themes had emerged which adequately described the data from the interviews, categorical clustering was repeated to verify the accuracy of themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes that emerged in the analysis of one-on-one interviews were used to create a framework with which to analyze the focus group interview data and the one-page summations that study participants had submitted. As necessary, themes and subthemes were collapsed into one another or removed altogether in order to ensure that single themes were truly reflective of the data that had been gathered, thus resulting in slight variations of themes and subthemes for each data source.

At all points during data analysis, participant anonymity was protected. Each participant was given an alphanumeric code in place of her name and this code replaced any identifying information on transcripts and summations. These codes were also used to track the extent to which each participant was involved in each aspect of data collection (see Appendix B).

## Limitations

Although study limitations were mitigated as much as possible, two main limitations still exist. These include an imbalance in the involvement of participants and distinct variation in the international teaching practicum placements due to vast differences in destination countries.

### ***Participation Imbalance***

Two destination countries, Kenya and Italy, were available to teacher candidates for international teaching practicum placements. Among the 20 teacher candidates who went to Italy to complete an international teaching practicum, ten agreed to participate in this study (50%). Among the teacher candidates who went to Kenya to complete an international teaching practicum, five out of 16 teacher candidates agreed to participate in this study (30.2%). Furthermore, of those who agreed to participate in this study, six from the Italy international teaching practicum group contributed data to all of the three data sources, whereas the participants from the Kenya international teaching practicum group only contributed data to one or two of the three possible data sources.

### ***Differences in Practicum Experience Based on the Differences in Destination Country***

Because Kenya and Italy are very different in terms of culture, political stability and education system, the types of experiences noted by those who visited Italy were very different from those of candidates who visited Kenya. Coding and analysis showed, however, that despite differences in destination countries, the experiences yielded similar results across participants. Still, it is important to consider these differences in destination when reviewing the related data.

## **Results/Findings**

Overarching themes that emerged from one-on-one interviews, individual summations and focus groups in this study include: (a) professional growth; (b) cultural and community connectedness; (c) awareness of opportunities; and (d) practical considerations. Furthermore, subthemes exist within each theme, which helps to narrow the focus of the findings and to allow differences in participant responses to be distinguished. Excerpts from data sources are provided where appropriate. Excerpts from teacher candidates who went to Italy for their international teaching practicum experience are denoted with an alphanumeric code beginning with the letter "I" (for example, I123), and teacher candidates who went to Kenya were given an alphanumeric code beginning with the letter "K" (for example, K123).

### **Professional Growth**

Within the theme of *professional growth*, participant responses are further categorized into *flexibility and resourcefulness*, *solidified desire to teach*, *communication skills*, *learning beyond lesson planning*, and *awareness of cultural differences*. It is important to note that in the latter subtheme, *awareness of cultural differences*, this awareness includes both acceptance and non-acceptance of these recognized differences. Additionally, the subtheme *new directions in teaching* existed in focus group and summation data but not in data from individual interviews.

### ***Flexibility and Resourcefulness***

Many participants commented on how participating in an international teaching practicum placement made them more flexible as teachers and that this flexibility might not otherwise have been as well developed had they not taken part in an international teaching practicum placement. For example, one participant commented on how being in a new environment promotes the need for flexibility:

It definitely helps you to be flexible, or it teaches you how to be flexible, because you don't know the language, you don't know the students, a lot of the time there was a huge barrier between the interaction with your associate teacher or with the teacher that was in the classroom so that was one of the most difficult things. (I004, interview)

Another participant explained:

In Kenya I learned a lot about flexibility. We were told before we went to the placement to be flexible but I didn't realize how flexible we had to be and, for example we would go into the classroom in the morning expecting to have certain things to teach throughout the day and generally throughout the day we would have at least one of those things change and we would have to shift our lessons around to accommodate that so definitely for me it was learning how to be flexible with the teaching. (K001, focus group)

### ***Solidified Desire to Teach***

Many participants made reference to the idea that participating in an international teaching practicum reinforced their desire to teach and reminded them that teaching was the correct career choice for them: "I believe that this opportunity has sparked and rejuvenated my joy and love for teaching!" (I004, summation).

### ***Communication Skills***

Because teacher candidates were teaching in areas where English was not the primary language, many participants commented on how their international teaching practicum experience influenced their communication skills and required them to utilize new communications skills and techniques in order to interact with others: "The language barrier was definitely the biggest challenge there, I didn't think it would be as big of a barrier as it ended up being" (K004, interview). Furthermore, even when some English was spoken among the local people in the given destination country, communication was still difficult:

We had to speak really slowly because obviously the English that they are taught is British English, so all of the words we use and even the way we speak, like our accent is completely different from the ones they're used to, so whenever we said something they'd be like *wait, wait, can you rephrase that or say that again?* – Because they won't understand some of our terminology. (I009, interview)

### ***Learning beyond Lesson Planning***

Teacher candidates provided evidence suggesting that their participation in an international teaching practicum placement provided them with a broader understanding of what teaching is. It provided them with experiences related to questioning the role of curriculum, understanding classroom and behaviour management, and contemplating broader issues related to educational policy. Teacher candidates moved beyond being concerned with their primary role as planner of structured lessons and experienced broader aspects of education and its systems.

Their books weren't structured based on a curriculum. They weren't going through units and flowing through a certain method as we do. They were just doing what they, whatever concept that they wanted. If it took three days to cover, it took three days to cover. If it was done at one o'clock, it was done at one o'clock. (I005, interview)



Furthermore:

... we got a brief look at their standardized test and the expectations are not like, they're just sort of widespread for the whole state. So they're developed and made in Nairobi, which is a metropolitan centre, and then we're teaching in a rural school and the language skills are not the same. In Nairobi, a lot of people speak English fluently, and in the rural area where we were, they don't. And in grade 4 they have to write their test in English, and if they don't speak English very well, how are they going to pass? (K005, interview).

### ***Awareness of Cultural Differences***

As teacher candidates completed their international teaching practicum placements, they gained awareness of differences among various cultures. In some cases, participants had a value-neutral awareness, and in others participants offered support or rejection of various cultural differences. However, in either case, awareness statements were made with respect and reflected a deeper understanding of differing cultural norms.

I think when you go into another culture you can't impose your own cultural standards into their structures, you just kind of have to be flexible and learn and adopt their ways. (I009, interview)

As well, a participant explained:

I mean I have a lot of questions, but it's things I understand, like a ritual sacrifice of a cow and they have a big supper, I understand why they do it because it's a part of their culture. Or they hang their homework in their home, because they're so proud of their kids, and I question why they do that but I also understand because they're so proud of school. (K003, interview)

### ***New Directions in Teaching***

Within this subtheme, comments made are taken solely from participants in the Italy group of teacher candidates. Participants commented on how their teaching experience abroad has influenced their practice and changed aspects of their teaching and management methods. For example:

I believe that this placement has helped me to grow and become a better teacher. Before teaching at an Italian school, I tended to spend very little time planning out art lessons for my classes. My associate teachers often told me to focus on my other lessons first, and then use any leftover time for art. However, this experience has made me realize that art can be incorporated into almost every lesson and can help students to truly connect with what they are learning. In the future, I will make a more conscious effort to incorporate art into more of my lessons. (I002, summation)

### ***Cultural and Community Connectedness***

Within *cultural and community connectedness*, subthemes include *immersion into the community* and *cultural experiences*. Although present in the one-on-one interviews, the *cultural experiences* subtheme was not noted in the focus group interview, although it was briefly mentioned in one summation that was collected from a participant who travelled to Kenya for an international teaching practicum. Within the focus group analysis, two additional subthemes emerged and are described as *post practicum community impact* and *building community with peers*.



### *Immersion into Community*

Participants in this study referred to the idea that participating in an international teaching practicum placement not only influenced them as teacher candidates, but that it also had a social impact. One of these impacts included becoming immersed in a new culture and connecting with the local community: "We had a lot of time to really get immersed in their culture and in Sulmona, we got to know some of the business people there..." (I008, interview).

As well:

They definitely made you feel like you were part of the community. Every day we would drive by to practicum and you wouldn't pass a single person that wouldn't say 'hi' to you, so it definitely made you feel at home and a part of their community. (K004, interview)

### *Cultural Experiences*

Participants made comments about their involvement in other experiences beyond teaching. In some cases, this involved visiting the local area and seeing tourist sites, and in other cases this involved humanitarian work, such as building local schools or viewing regions that had been devastated by natural disasters, such as the earthquake sites of L'Aquila in Italy. Participants explained that these experiences were important to them because they were able to make the most of a travel experience rather than participating in only one aspect of the international teaching practicum.

I thought Italy was beautiful, I mean there's so much culture and history in it that even though we were in a really small town, there was a lot to do. We went on a tour and saw old churches and old war monuments and just the remnants of Roman history, so that was good. (I009, interview)

We built schools... we helped plant trees, we did all this stuff with the community, and I don't know if other placements do as much as that so I would recommend doing a lot of that because it helps you understand you know what I mean. You get more out of it when you engage in the community. (K003, interview)

### *Post-Practicum Community Impact*

It is important to note that even after the international teaching practicum had ended, participants still felt connected to the community where they had spent time abroad. They incorporated some of these community elements into their everyday lives, both within their chosen career path in their home country and in everyday happenings in their home country.

It would be such a good experience to have adult language learners from a different country come here and have us teach them as well, in our own environment as opposed to Italy as well, so I am still hoping that happens. (I009, focus group)

The impact that it had on me, in being in Kenya, was more of an impact on some of my personal choices here and I guess a lot of that was seeing, I guess the water usage there.... so it made me a little more conscious of my water use and every once in a while when I do certain things I think back on what I saw there, for example, some of the things I saw there and I am just more conscious with some of the things that I do now. (K001, focus group)

### ***Building Community with Peers***

Participants explained that although they had spent the previous four years of their concurrent education program with various peers, they had not built close relationships with everyone. In engaging in this international teaching practicum placement, they were able to forge relationships with their teaching partners and maintain these relationships as they moved into their final year of teacher education and beyond. For example, one participant noted:

You build relationships and you get to know people, who they really are, so fast in such a short time. Especially with people in *con ed.*, your classes change every single year so for the most part you recognize the people that, like in being in Italy you really got to know them in a different way, like time that you didn't necessarily have when you were here. (I005, focus group)

Sometimes when there were challenges on the trip, they were difficult to get through without my support system from home, but I really connected with other people in the group that were very understanding, supportive and helpful! (K002, summation)

### **Awareness of Opportunities**

The theme *awareness of opportunities* refers to teacher candidates realizing the opportunities that they received both during their international practicum placement and after they had returned from their placement. Subthemes include *living in the moment*, *future desire to teach abroad* and *future desire to remain teaching in Canada*. The subtheme *living in the moment* was only identified during the one-on-one interviews.

#### ***Living in the Moment***

Many participants indicated that, because their international teaching practicum was an opportunity that they may not have otherwise experienced, there was an increased need to be active and involved in all aspects of the practicum as much as possible. One participant explained, "So I didn't bring my cell phone with me so, I had to buy a watch when I was there.... Once you got there you kind of got into it, just like, go with the flow" (I001, interview). Furthermore, another participant commented, "You have to be completely open to the experience, so live in the moment and that's the only way that you're really going to get anything back" (K005, interview).

#### ***Future Desire to Teach Abroad***

For many participants in this study, engaging in an international practicum experience confirmed expectations about wanting to teach abroad in the future and, in some cases, the experience inspired those who had not yet considered international teaching as a career option.

I wanted to see the education – how theirs was compared to ours – just because maybe that would be an opportunity for me once I graduate; to go overseas. To see what it was like, it was a lot different than our education system, that's for sure. (I008, interview)

#### ***Future Desire to Remain in Canada***

Although some participants had previously stated that their international teaching practicum experience had inspired them to pursue international teaching in the future, for others the experience fulfilled their desire to teach abroad such that they no longer felt the urge to teach abroad in the future. This experience showed

some teacher candidates how difficult it can be to teach abroad and inspired a preference for teaching in their home country and in their primary language.

I think that for me, living here, this is where my life is, and I want to still help in Kenya but I feel the best way for me to do that is teaching here full time and then using my experience to help. (K003, interview)

I personally, really, my long term goal is to teach in the same board that I went to school in and I am extremely tied to my family here, that I know myself, I couldn't give up everything that I have now. (I005, interview)

## Practical Considerations

As with any program, there are practical aspects to consider. Study participants revealed a number of practical considerations related to their international practicum experience. These included *preparedness*, *the role of the faculty advisor*, and *dissonance between teaching expectations and teaching experience*. An additional subtheme, *sacrifice versus payoff*, emerged from the focus group data but was not noticed in any of the one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, it should be noted that no practical considerations were discovered in the analysis of any summations.

### Preparedness

Many participants commented on the need to be prepared for an international teaching practicum placement, describing the ways in which they prepared for their experience and noting a clear preference for being well prepared for the experience.

Most of my prep had to do with buying stuff to go there. I didn't have, well, I had a backpack because I had been before, but I didn't have like mosquito, bug repellent, Crocs, and all that kind of stuff, so I had to get all that stuff which, it's a lot of research because you don't want to get you know, bad Crocs and be stuck in the mud. And then shots, you had to get a lot of different shots. But in terms of teaching we didn't, we weren't told what we had to teach, we weren't told what grades we were teaching, we didn't really even know where we were going, like we knew we were going to Kenya but that's all they could tell us. We didn't have an address or a phone number or anything like that so we couldn't really research where we were going. (K003, interview)

The majority of my time spent preparing was researching what our actual city, like the city of Sulmona was going to be like, so I knew kind of what I was going to be entering into. So I spent a lot of my time checking the weather before I was going to go, and looking at the history of Sulmona, so like before knowing that what it's known for, that it's the place where confetti and candies were created.... (I005, interview)

Additionally, some participants offered suggestions of ways to prepare for an international teaching practicum. This preparation was generally focused on learning the language of the destination country and being prepared to speak in simple phrases to local community members in the destination country: "I like that suggestion of basic phrases would be good" (I001, focus group) and "I wish I had taken the Italian [language class], I just never had time to take it so I would recommend to students who were going if they could try to plan before" (I005, focus group).

### *Role of Faculty Advisor*

Participants noted the important role of the faculty advisor. Teacher candidates reported the positive impact of having a faculty advisor present for the international teaching practicum and explained the helpful roles that faculty advisors played in navigating the local area and being able to communicate effectively in the dominant language of the destination country. For example, one participant stated: "We relied a lot on the people that did know Italian like [Faculty Advisor] and [Faculty Advisor] and a couple of the girls" (I008, interview). Furthermore:

A lot of [preparation] was the meetings with the groups. They were really helpful. [Faculty Advisor] and [Faculty Advisor] prepared us as much as they could . . . just, sort of explaining what would be expected of us, what some of the trip would entail, some of the experiences we would have and, even afterwards, they made sure they had a meeting with us to deal with coming home and they prepared us even with the teaching aspects of what would be expected of us and then also with the culture shock and all of that. (K002, interview)

The role of the faculty advisor was not mentioned during the focus group interview. This may be partly due to the presence of two faculty advisors during the focus group interview.

### *Dissonance between Teaching Expectations and Teaching Experience*

Some participants in this study commented on how their expectations about what they would be teaching and how their teaching would manifest were not met. Others also commented on how they would have liked to know more about specific details related to their actual teaching time during their international teaching practicum placement. It is important to note that participants from the Kenya group of teacher candidates did not make interview comments that reflected this subtheme. In addition, this subtheme was not noted during the focus group interview.

I think that, and I understand with all trips, it's hard to be extremely organized since we're entering into a different country so I know that we didn't find out our placements until the day, well probably until like a week into, once we had arrived, so that aspect was difficult and I think that sometimes we went in with such notions that we were going to be teaching certain lessons and developed ideas on such broad concepts that we thought they would want to know, but in reality, when we got there, nothing that I had prepared was used, once I actually arrived. (I005, interview)

### *Sacrifice versus Payoff*

Because the international teaching practicum placement in Italy occurred outside of the standard winter semester, teacher candidates who participated in this teaching practicum had to devote their personal time to this experience and in some cases had to give up summer employment or other commitments in order to engage in the international teaching practicum placement. For example:

I think it's also difficult when the time came to wrap my head around being willing to give up a month of my life because so much time in school it's like, 'oh no, my summer job, what is going to happen to me?' Especially because my placement got moved until May so there were a lot of risks that you would have to take to go.... I know that now, granted that if I was in fifth year now, I don't think that I would leave to go to Italy, because so much of my future steps are residing on connections I make this year. (I005, focus group)

## Discussion

Contrary to Kissock and Richardson (2010) and Kelly (2004), who describe low uptake among international teaching practicum placements, this study had quite a large uptake of teacher candidates with an overall participation rate of 28.13%. Possible reasons for high uptake in this study could include the presence of supervisors in these experiences, the ability to obtain credit for these experiences as a teaching practicum placement in which an evaluation is provided to teacher candidates, the ability to participate in other teaching practicum experiences in school boards where they wish to be employed in the future, and the current difficulty in obtaining permanent employment as a teacher with a school board in Ontario. Furthermore, the Faculty of Education in this study only offers concurrent education, so participants have four years to decide whether or not they want to participate and to make the appropriate arrangements, including financial arrangements.

The findings from this study show that many advantages are gained from participating in an international teaching practicum placement, in addition to the direct links to opportunities for classroom instruction. Within the four overarching themes of *professional growth*, *cultural and community connectedness*, *awareness of opportunities* and *practical considerations*, there is widespread evidence to support the benefits and advantages of participating in an international teaching practicum placement, regardless of the destination country. For example, within *professional growth*, teaching candidates in this study were interested in their role as a teacher and how to improve their teaching abilities when faced with a different school system, different educational values and widespread language barriers. Quezada (2004) suggests that the desire to simply be a tourist must be overcome in international teaching practicum placements. This study suggests that the “tourist approach” to international teaching practicum placements can be overcome, at least in these specific instances.

Furthermore, cultural experiences, such as those mentioned in the *cultural and community connectedness* theme, were important in this study. Much of the reviewed literature does not mention the need for experiences outside of the teaching practicum placement, and instead refers to the experiences that come directly from teaching and living in a new country. The program in this study offers specific cultural experiences as well as experiences that take place but are generally unplanned. As data from this study reveal, these experiences, such as visiting the earthquake sites in L'Aquila and building schools in various regions of Kenya, had an important impact on the global awareness of teacher candidates both within their role of “teacher” and outside that role in everyday life. Although cultural experiences may happen incidentally when participating in an international teaching practicum, building them into the actual program, such as in this study, can help to ensure that goals for promoting cultural and community connectedness are supported and achieved.

Additionally, teacher candidates gained skills that can be used in the classroom, such as flexibility, resilience and global awareness. Specifically, this global awareness is noted by Kissock and Richardson (2010) as being necessary for meeting the needs of students in an increasingly globalized world. This increased awareness was achieved through the personal development that teacher candidates demonstrated in bringing back elements of their host country to their home communities and engaging in further international efforts and experiences. For many, this experience reconfirmed their initial desire to become a teacher and allowed participants to experience their role as teacher beyond the tasks of presenting lessons, tracking progress and managing student behaviour. This experience placed participants in the greater social context of what it is to be a teacher, where they were able to understand and question educational policy while advocating for optimal learning conditions for students. Consistent with Kelly (2004), teacher candidates gained information and insights on international issues and knowledge beyond their local community as a result of these international teaching practicum placements, and this insight can be transferred to students as teacher candidates return to their home communities to begin their teaching careers. Furthermore, as some

participants noted, this insight is just the beginning of what they hope to be an extended immersion into international teaching through other various agencies that recruit Canadian teachers and volunteers.

When practical aspects of the program are taken into account, parallels with research by Stachowski and Sparks (2007) can be drawn in terms of the need for being prepared. Teacher candidates in this study noted the need and desire to be prepared for their teaching practicum, as well as for engaging in the standard culture of the destination country. Unlike Stachowski and Sparks (2007), however, participants in this study made positive comments about having a faculty advisor present throughout the experience and noted the need for peer support and interpersonal connections throughout the practicum placement. Another practical aspect found in this study is consistent with a previous study by Cantalini-Williams and Tessaro (2011), where teacher candidates once again stated their interest in actual teaching activities while on an international teaching practicum placement versus taking a “tourism approach.” It is important to consider these practical aspects when planning an international teaching practicum experience in a faculty of education and to consider discrepancies found between various research studies related to these experiences.

## Conclusions

This study recognized that teacher candidates see their participation in an international teaching practicum as important to their development as a teacher and to forming a deeper global awareness. Participants became aware of the vast differences that exist between school systems at an international level, but these differences were received with respect and understanding. This finding is independent of the participants' approval or rejection of these differences. Teacher candidates in this study also noted that they experienced several personal benefits such as being aware of features of Canadian society that may be taken for granted. Most interestingly, it is important to note that the main goal of teacher candidates who participated in this international practicum was to be immersed in teaching opportunities. Being in host classrooms and interacting with those students as often as possible was widely valued in the comments of participating teacher candidates. This demonstrates that teacher candidates elect to participate in these experiences with the ultimate goal of teaching in a diverse setting rather than to use the experience as a means of travel and tourism.

This international teaching practicum placement is an innovative model of practicum in that it combines such elements as teaching abroad, team teaching, cultural experiences, exposure to curriculum diversity and the opportunity for second language instruction in one practicum placement. The benefits of this innovative model are far-reaching and impact not only the teacher candidate but all those who interact with the participating teacher candidate as well. For example, the students in the host placement, future students, associate teachers, faculty advisors, the community in the destination country and the home community of the teacher candidate appear to derive benefits from the results of the international experience. It is recommended that such international teaching practicum placements continue to be provided and expanded where possible in faculties of education. To support uptake and participation, such initiatives and incentives as faculty facilitation, course credits, immersion in the host culture and opportunities for professional development should be available. For example, faculties of education that are in a position to offer similar international teaching practicum placements might consider including planned cultural experiences and residency within the local community where the teaching practicum will be taking place. This promotes cultural and community connectedness and is deemed to be of great value to teacher candidates. Furthermore, it is beneficial to provide faculty facilitation for teacher candidates. This is important in ensuring that appropriate preparations are made before the placement and that expectations in regards to teaching are met during the practicum. It is also important to ensure that the faculty facilitators who do attend are able to assist with planned cultural experiences and to provide support in other areas when needed, such as addressing issues with language barriers and navigating the local community and culture. The innovative aspects of this international teaching practicum placement could be replicated in other international experiences to derive similar benefits. The sustained high rate of participation – approximately 30% of the total eligible teacher candidate population

participated in each of the previous five years – is a testament to the value attributed to this opportunity within a concurrent education program.



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