



A Belizean Education: Learning From an International Field Experience

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ABSTRACT

Although field experiences may be staple features of teacher education programs, international field experiences are still growing in popularity. This is particularly true at our university, where international field experiences are still very much in their infancy. As such, this article describes a recently completed international field experience. More specifically, a selection of a pre-service teacher's reflections—focused upon preconceptions, observations, professional change/growth, and personal change/growth—are shared and explored. Given that international field experiences are still relatively new within many teacher education programs, and are irregularly offered or altogether absent within others, we hope that our account of learning through such an experience will prove informative and educative to others.

All Canadian teacher education programs include field experiences of some sort (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Falkenberg, 2010). These field experiences have many labels; somewhat synonymous terms include “practicum,” “clinical experience,” and “internship.”¹ While field experiences may be required and/or regulated by various bodies (e.g., provincial ministries, teacher accreditation agencies, universities), they are also recognized as necessary and sound pedagogical learning experiences. Indeed, in recent times, Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasized this point, suggesting that additional attention ought to be given to the field experience. More specifically, she suggested, “extensive clinical work, *intensive* supervision, [and] *expert* modeling of practice” (p. 307) are underused yet critical components of quality teacher education programs.

Although the field experience might be appropriately labelled, “the most pervasive pedagogy in teacher education” (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 42)—long acknowledged for its profound impact upon pre-service teachers’ learning—there is no particular model that has been adopted by all Canadian teacher education programs (nor is it herein being suggested that there ought to be). To be clear, the field experience is a staple feature within *all* Canadian teacher education programs. However, the duration and design of field experiences vary tremendously among universities’ teacher education programs. For example, across Canada, the duration of field experiences ranges from eight weeks to 22 weeks (Gambhir, Broad, Evans, & Gaskell, 2008). The design of field experiences similarly varies. Some take place in parts of days, others in full days, and others over the course of many weeks, or months (Gambhir et al., 2008). Some universities might require a single field experience while others might require four or more. In addition to such interuniversity variety, considerable differences also often exist within a single university’s program. That is, despite the stated or intended design of a particular field experience program, other variables impact the actual experiences of pre-service teachers. For example, supervision and/or mentoring practices and abilities vary widely, as do the nature of pre-service teachers’ assumed teaching responsibilities (e.g., with respect to instructional time or “aligned” teachable subjects).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned dissimilarities, and the absence of a shared model, there is considerable evidence suggesting field experiences within Canada’s teacher education programs do nonetheless share some common core characteristics (Van Nuland, 2011). For example Ralph, Walker, and Wimmer (2008) observed all field experiences have the same primary aim (i.e., to mentor pre-service teachers as they acquire professional skills and knowledge in authentic real-world settings) as well as additional common elements (e.g., supervision/mentorship roles, formative and summative assessment processes). Though Ralph et al. (2008) identified these sorts of commonalities, they also recognized an additional noteworthy point, namely that, “programs *all* have idiosyncratic features that are unique to the situational contexts in which each practicum experience is embedded” (p. 160). Our field experience program is no different. That is, we share these two somewhat universal characteristics and yet, like other institutions, we also have our own unique features and practices.

Common and Unique Features of Our Field Experience

Commonalities stated by Ralph et al. (2008) related to aim and elements are certainly present within our program. For instance, the articulated purpose of our field experience is to enable, “pre-service teachers to make connections between thinking about and engaging in the practice of teaching” (St. Francis Xavier University, 2013, p. 4). Like others, we hope that our pre-service teachers are able to develop and refine requisite knowledge, skills, and attributes with real students in real schools; only so much can be taught and learned within university courses. We believe pre-service teachers must be afforded opportunities for genuine praxis; this may be done “by honoring practice in conjunction with reflection and research” (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 171). Such a process is necessarily not linear but, rather, might be best conceptualized as cyclical and recursive. Relatedly, and as Moore (2003) suggested, we recognize the reciprocal relationship that exists between educational theory and classroom practice. To us, making sense of classroom coursework requires in-the-field experience, and vice versa.

In each of our field experiences, pre-service teachers also receive formative assessments from their cooperating teachers and faculty advisors. Paralleling their course-based instruction related to assessment, these formative assessments are in many ways privileged and prioritized over the final summative assessments. Such a focus upon formative assessment in the field is not unusual. Raths and Lyman (2003) investigated many teacher education programs and found assessments of pre-service teachers were formative more often than they were summative. Moreover, as is the case for such programs, our formative assessment process, “resembles a mentoring activity when the knowledge assessed is discussed with students, and the aim is to improve students’ performance” (Hegender, 2010, p. 153). At the conclusion of each year, pre-service teachers receive summative assessments written by their faculty advisors (with consultation from their cooperating teachers). Again, these points of information are not unique; many others within other Canadian teacher education programs ought to recognize familiar features.

Together, our location, our population of pre-service teachers, our complement of faculty, and the structure of our degree program shape the design of our field experience. We are situated in a relatively remote rural location and are very often appropriately branded as a residential university; very few of our students are from the immediate area. We generally have approximately 240 Bachelor of Education (BEd) students. This is small compared to the Canadian range of fewer than 100 to

over 4,000 students (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). Similarly, with a faculty size of 17, we are relatively small compared to Canada's other teacher education programs, where faculty complements range from six to approximately 150 (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). Finally, compared to our peers at other institutions, faculty members here enjoy a considerable amount of instructional time with pre-service teachers. That is, we have a two-year (60-credit) post-initial degree program. Unlike shorter post-initial degree programs (some of which are only eight months long) and many concurrent degree programs (in which most-to-all education courses may be taken in the final year), our consecutive degree program allows faculty members to work with pre-service teachers all of the time (including in the field), for two consecutive years. Together, our geography, population, and consecutive degree program enable (and, in some ways, constrain) us to offer considerable experience in the field, under the supervision of all of our tenure-track and tenured professors.

Our two-year program includes four field experiences, one after each of four terms of instruction. During the first year, pre-service teachers generally teach within one of their teachable subjects (and/or grade levels), increasing their instructional time from 25% to 50% from their first field experience to their second. During the second year, pre-service teachers generally teach within their other teachable subject (and/or grade levels), increasing their instructional time from 75% to 100% from their third field experience to their fourth. To more fully appreciate the structure of our field experience program, see Figure 1.

YEAR 1		YEAR 2	
Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
5 weeks	6 weeks	5 weeks	6 weeks
Nov-Dec	Mar-Apr	Nov-Dec	Mar-Apr
≈ 25% of FTE	≈ 50% of FTE	≈ 75% of FTE	≈ 100% of FTE

Fig. 1: Field experience structure

No teacher education program in Canada requires more than the 22 weeks of field experience we have here (Gambhir et al., 2008). Moreover, in order to obtain teacher certification, pre-service teachers need only accumulate 15 weeks of field experience. The "extra" seven weeks afford us considerable license to be especially flexible in the delivery of the fourth, and final, field experience. One possibility is for second year pre-service teachers to apply for an individualized placement option in their final field experience. Such individualized placements vary considerably. For example,

recent individualized placements have occurred in detention centres, provincial sport organizations, museums, and not-for-profit organizations. Another possibility for second year pre-service teachers offers an especially unique learning opportunity. This second option is an international field experience.

International Field Experiences

International field experiences have been increasingly present in various teacher education programs since the 1980s (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). There have been many factors that have contributed to this trend. These include logical reasons such as the increased focus upon multicultural and global perspectives within teacher education programs, as well as somewhat less noble reasons such as developing international programs to attract potential candidates in an increasingly competitive teacher education market (Baker & Giacchino-Baker, 2000; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). Not surprisingly, with the initial introduction and subsequent increase in this practice, there has been a burgeoning interest in related research (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Wilson, 1993).

Willard-Holt (2001) investigated the impact of a one-week international field experience. In her study, American pre-service teachers travelled to Mexico and taught in a Spanish-English bilingual school. By conducting questionnaires and interviews before and after the experience (as well as one year afterwards), Willard-Holt found that pre-service teachers enjoyed long-lasting positive effects upon both their teaching (e.g., they developed empathy and flexibility) and their personal lives (e.g., they gained appreciation for their resources and became more self-confident). It is also worth noting that Willard-Holt's research also uncovered some negative impacts of the international field experience. These included, for example, overconfidence and an inflated perceived understanding of Mexican culture.

Willard-Holt's (2001) research results complemented earlier research by Mahan and Stachowski (1992). While Willard-Holt's research with a relatively small number of participants reported on both the positive teaching and personal changes that occurred, Mahan and Stachowski's research with a large number of participants quantified these observations and found that most changes (approximately 73%) were personal in nature, rather than related to teaching. Some of these positive personal characteristics included flexibility, patience, and self-confidence (it ought to be acknowledged that many of these personal characteristics might also appropriately be connected to improved teaching practice as well). Stachowski and Sparks (2007) continued to research their teacher education program's field experiences and found

pre-service teachers' reflections focused on a small number of themes. These themes included promoting cross-cultural understanding, exchanging knowledge with host teachers, enhanced classroom managements skills and strategies, and awareness of alternative ways of reaching students.

More recently, Pence and Macgillivray (2008) sought to investigate the impact of an international field experience on pre-service teachers. They were interested in exploring if their pre-service teachers would report positive experiences similar to those previously discovered by others. More specifically, the sorts of experiences they were looking for included, "challenging students' preconceived ideas about culturally diverse others and different types of schools, personal and professional changes, and any other ways the students felt challenged and grew" (p. 18). Pence and Macgillivray's research provided a functional framework—focused upon preconceptions, observations, professional change/growth, and personal change/growth—from which to explore the value of an international field experience.

Our International Field Experience

Our university's international field experience option is relatively new within our teacher education program. In the past six years, international field experiences have occurred in Iceland, Kenya, Australia, Norway, China, and, most recently, Belize. Though these six countries obviously offered entirely different cultural experiences, the Belizean experience was particularly unique: it offered pre-service teachers an opportunity to teach within a school with limited material and human resources and it also required them to live (in very close quarters) amongst their students in a small Indigenous (Mayan) community within a relatively poor and developing nation (see Figures 2 and 3 for photographs of the accommodations and the school site).



Fig. 2: Accommodations



Fig. 3: School site

Relationships and Roles During the Field Experience

It is a useful exercise to provide a brief description of our relationship with one another and our roles during the field experience. In addition to being a faculty advisor, Dan is also an associate professor. Dan organized the international field experience, supervised 12 pre-service teachers, and completed formative and summative assessments for six pre-service teachers. In addition to being a pre-service teacher while in Belize, Rebecca is now a public school teacher in England. During the international field experience, Rebecca taught all subjects to 31 students in an Infant 1 class—equivalent to kindergarten in Canada.

We had known one another for over two years and, prior to the international field experience, already shared many positive experiences together. For example, Dan taught Rebecca three separate courses, was her faculty advisor in her first year (in a “domestic” placement), invited and mentored Rebecca at a national student leadership conference, and co-presented a session with her at a provincial teachers’ conference. We have developed what can be described as a close professional relationship with one another. Today, we view each other as colleagues.

Focusing Reflections

Given the intuitive sense that our international field experience provided many of the positive professional and personal benefits cited in the literature, and the framework for inquiry offered by Pence and Macgillivray (2008), we felt that it would be a worthwhile task to reflect upon the Belizean field experience. To do this, we attended to Pence and Macgillivray’s areas of reflective inquiry: preconceptions, observations, professional change/growth, and personal change/growth. During the international

field experience, Rebecca completed daily reflections and shared them with Dan. These reflections focused upon Pence and Macgillivray's four areas of reflective inquiry, as well as a number of other topics related, for example, to Rebecca's independently set professional growth goals. While in Belize, pre-service teacher/faculty advisor meetings allowed for a discussion of these reflections. Upon returning to Canada, Rebecca wrote detailed reflections focusing more closely upon Pence and Macgillivray's four areas. The four guiding questions for these reflections were:

1. What were your preconceptions before going to Belize related to the: education system, curriculum, students, teachers, culture, and your anticipated strengths/weaknesses in the new context?
2. What were your observations when you arrived at Belize related to the: education system, curriculum, students, teachers, culture, and your anticipated strengths/weaknesses in the new context?
3. Describe your professional change/growth as it relates to the following categories: planning and preparation, learning environment, engagement in learning through teaching, and professional responsibilities.
4. Describe your personal change/growth.

Reflections on the International Field Experience

Given the large number of guided reflection prompts (17 when all sub-questions are considered), there was considerable content within Rebecca's reflections. That being so, together we decided to focus upon a selection of those reflections that we agreed were especially important, congruent, and personally meaningful. Included below are selected excerpts from Rebecca, with accompanying responses from Dan.

Rebecca's Preconceptions

- I had no idea what the students would be like because I had never interacted with children in countries other than Canada and the United States. I created the idea that Belizean students would appreciate my presence and behave very well because they wouldn't want to upset me. I thought they would be very grateful for the resources I brought and would have the desire to learn and absorb everything new I taught them. I thought they would respect and take care of everything I left in their classroom because it would be a special gift from a different country.

- My professor told me that I would probably have more education and teaching experience than my Belizean cooperating teacher. Still, I expected to learn new behaviour management strategies, classroom management techniques, and lesson plan ideas (that required few resources and no technology).
- I expected the Mayans to be old-fashioned, meaning the men would work out in the fields while the women stayed home to take care of the house and children. I sort of made up the idea that they lived like traditional Aboriginals who lived off the land. I thought the Mayans would dress in hand-made clothing, hunt for and grow the majority of their food, and pray to Mayan gods. I expected the Mayans to appreciate and love nature and take care of the surrounding environment.
- I anticipated that I would easily adapt to teaching in a new country/culture because I can think quickly on my feet and I am used to getting thrown right into things. I thought that it would be hard to create lessons that would engage 31 five-year-olds without the use of technology because I am so used to having the luxury of Googling, “Youtubing,” and photocopying everything.

Dan’s Response

It was certainly understandable for Rebecca to have some preconceptions that were soon discovered to be misconceptions. Indeed, as this was essentially her first time interacting with children from a country outside of Canada or the United States, she simply did not have a frame of reference beyond her immediate and local experience. Although I had been to Belize before (and at the school site as well), I was not entirely sure how Rebecca’s students would receive her (or her resources and gifts). My observation, which was attended to within her reflections as well, was that her students’ perceived lack of care and respect was troubling and disconcerting to her. It is also a fair statement to suggest that all of her peers had somewhat similar experiences. However, I would suggest that the students’ perceived lack of care and respect had less to do with character or personality shortcomings than with poverty in the village. That is, although the community and school lacked materials, equipment, and resources, there were many cheap and cheaply made products available to students that might be best described as consumables (e.g., candy, discount store toys). Given that students were generally only given access to products that must be immediately consumed (or that, under normal conditions, might reasonably be expected to last for only days or hours), it should be of little surprise that additional care and respect was not given for the resources or gifts brought by pre-service teachers.

The other noteworthy preconception is related to Rebecca's imagined lives and lifestyles of the Mayan people. In some ways, her reflection conjured "noble savage" views and primitivism discourses (Deutschlander & Miller, 2003; Ellingson, 2001). Rebecca had simply never been to another country with an Indigenous population. Nonetheless, some of these preconceptions were still partly or wholly true (e.g., traditional gender roles, hunting and growing of food, care for the bordering rain forest). Having supervised Rebecca in a previous field experience in which many of her students were First Nations or Métis (and noting that Rebecca herself has Aboriginal ancestry), we were able to discuss her preconceptions and observations while contrasting the Canadian Aboriginal experience with the Belizean Mayan experience.

Rebecca's Observations

- There were a lot of policies and procedures set by the education system that I did not expect to encounter, and which I did not enjoy following. For example, teachers have to write out every lesson plan for the upcoming week and they have to submit their planning books by 3:30 p.m. on Thursday to the principal so that he can read over and assess them. Teachers also have to test students every Friday on all subjects and submit the students' marks into a computer that same day. The purpose of this testing is so the teachers can rank the students from first (highest score/rank in the class) to last (lowest score/rank in the class).
- I found the Belizean curriculum to be more advanced than our curriculum in many ways. For example, my Infant 1s were expected to read analog clocks, measure distances in centimetres, inches, and feet, and name or label all of the districts in Belize, as well as the names of the surrounding Central American countries. That said, I did not think the Language Arts outcomes were very practical for the age and ability of the Infant 1s: half of the students spoke Mayan as their first language and the other half only spoke Spanish. The outcomes were created for students who speak English as their first language. None of my students could read English and only two or three could sound out and/or print any sight words on their own.
- The students' behaviour in the classroom was not what I expected. Students did not respond to discipline from the teacher and they were verbally and physically aggressive towards one another. They often did not respect the property of others and they did not appreciate any resources my cooperating teacher or I gave them or let them use. The Belizean teachers were responsible for buying school supplies and resources with their own money, so my cooperating teacher would also get upset when the students destroyed the resources she bought or made for them. For example, they would rip pages out of books, rip posters off of walls, and break rulers in half.

- My cooperating teacher was a very nice woman who truly cares about her students. She put a lot of time into creating resources for her students to use in the classroom. However, she was expected to take on too many responsibilities and the large workload negatively impacted her teaching practices. She was so busy filling out lesson planning books for the principal that she did not have the energy and enthusiasm to teach engaging lessons.
- Old-fashioned gender roles are prominent in the Mayan culture. Typically, the men work for money and the women stay at home to cook, clean, sew, and take care of the children. Girls often drop out of school or do not continue on to high school so that they can stay at home and help their mothers run the household.
- My ability to adapt to situations I am thrown into (one of my strengths) really came in handy while I was teaching in Maya Center: on my first day I was teaching Religious Studies within the first five minutes of walking into the Infant 1 classroom. On my second day my teacher didn't show up to school and I was on my own for the entire day. I ended up teaching 75-100% (depending on the day) for the rest of my field experience with little-to-no support.

Dan's Response

Rebecca was able to be critical of educational practices while teaching within a system that required her to implement those same practices. Clearly, and again as evidenced through her reflections, Rebecca experienced considerable dissonance. It was reassuring to see that her critiques and criticisms were consonant with content taught within her education courses (e.g., related to distributed educational leadership, sound assessment practices, high stakes testing, etc.). She was also able to understand that these problematic practices were not Belizean in origin but, rather, were entirely consistent with what once happened within Canada as well. Indeed, these dated practices were initially introduced within Belize so as to agree with previously "proven" Western practices. It was similarly reassuring to see that Rebecca recognized that in her future role as a teacher (rather than as a pre-service teacher), she held considerable certainty about how she would address these issues.

Rebecca was also able to critically consider the curriculum content. She correctly observed that much of the curriculum content was more advanced than the content taught to students of a similar age in Canada. This was generally true of all grade levels within the school. While this presented minimal issues within most subject areas, it was plainly problematic for Language Arts. Rebecca observed that all of her students had initially learned a language other than English (i.e., either Mayan or Spanish). Although her class was made up entirely of what we might label as English as a Second Language

(ESL) students, the Language Arts curriculum was written for native English speakers. Her observation that this presented a problem is noteworthy; she knew that teaching and learning must necessarily take this into account. Rebecca observed that curriculum written is different than curriculum lived—and that curriculum lived must depend on context.

Rebecca's Professional Change/Growth

- My planning really improved. I had to prepare multiple activities for each lesson because my students ranged from barely understanding English to being able to finish an activity within five minutes. As time went on and I got to know my students, planning didn't become easier; I just got better at it and could complete it faster. I found it hard to long-term plan because only about one quarter of the students would understand the concept of each lesson, but I had to "follow the plan book" and move on to the next concept anyway. This experience made me aware that following a plan book is crucial to make sure all the outcomes are covered. However, it also taught me the importance of being flexible and spending extra time on concepts that students are having trouble understanding.
- The main form of assessment in the Infant 1 classroom is paper-and-pencil testing. Every Friday is exam day. The students sit at their desks and write seven tests, one for each subject (Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Health, Social Studies, Spanish, and Religious Studies). Each test has to be a minimum of 16 questions and the students' scores are recorded in the computer right away. The students are then ranked from 1 (the highest or "smartest") to 31 (the lowest or "least smart") according to their grade average. The students and their parents/guardians are told their weekly ranking. If a student has below a 70% average for two of the three terms, she/he will fail the year. I had to continue with exam day when I took over the classroom; however, I made the tests as fair as possible for the five-year-olds writing them. I also used observation and conversation (formative assessment) so I could plan my lessons and create the tests based on what my students were capable of demonstrating. This experience made me realize how important (daily) formative assessment is and how wrong it is to make five-year-olds write these high stakes tests (and then openly rank them based on their scores). I will never ask my future kindergarten students to write tests like these because I witnessed, first hand, that they don't have *any* positive impact on students or their learning at that age. I noticed that students who scored poorly had damaged self-worth and self-confidence, and their passion for learning and participating in school was destroyed.

- My Infant 1s were such a challenging group of students that I was constantly trying to think of new ways to deliver lessons and improve my personal teaching practice. This was my first classroom experience where I can openly say some lessons went really poorly. I soon figured out that I had to put myself in their shoes in order to create lessons that they were capable of understanding and engaging in. I learned a lot about using culturally diverse approaches. Learning about my students' home life, how they grow up, how they are treated, what they do after school, what is expected of them—these things were all important. I had to learn to see the world from their eyes and this changed my life, and who I want to be as a teacher and a person. This experience gave me a deeper passion for teaching students abroad.
- I developed very strong relationships with my students. In Maya Center, I was encouraged to hug my students and tell them I loved them. Being able to share my love and affection with my students (and accept their love and affection in return) was amazing. I hate giving “side hugs” and being afraid to be close with my students because of liability reasons. In Belize, it would be unusual to not hug a student when saying hello and goodbye. Showing my students how much I cared for them allowed me to gain their trust. Giving hugs and words of love taught the students that it is acceptable to be affectionate at school and it is important to share kindness and love with others. I will never replace the loving and special relationship I had with each and every one of my students in Maya Center, and giving hugs is what started it all.
- Creating a sense of community in my classroom took time. I had to take part in a lot of reflection—reflection with my self, my peers, my cooperating teacher, my professor, and (most importantly) my students. Finally, I realized that my students simply needed to learn how to compliment each other, care for each other, and cooperate instead of compete and tattle. This took time. By my last week in Belize my students finally started to create the positive classroom environment I was striving for. This experience taught me that teaching social and emotional learning is just as important as teaching curriculum content.

Dan's Response

Rebecca's observation that this field experience provided her first “real” challenges (e.g., for the first time some lessons went poorly) was noteworthy. In my nine years of teaching and supervising pre-service teachers, Rebecca has been one of the best I have seen teach. She is a skilled neophyte; perhaps encountering such difficulty was a good thing for her. As an exceptional pre-service teacher she had, until the international field experience, encountered few hurdles. She clearly came to understand that teaching

and learning could be improved upon by making an explicit effort to attend to her students' culture. Only by attempting to introduce culturally appropriate approaches was Rebecca able to connect content to students' lives so that the curriculum could become culturally relevant and engaging. Making these connections also enabled Rebecca to begin to develop constructive personal relationships with her students.

In addition to building relationships through discovering (and then including in instruction) students' culture, Rebecca also found that the international field experience enabled her to physically connect with her students in a manner that was all but forbidden in many Canadian schools. More senior teachers might recall a time when the physical displays of affection, compassion, or love described by Rebecca were commonplace within their own practice. However, today our pre-service teachers are less likely to invite or accept such physical displays. Indeed, here—and elsewhere I presume—we discourage it. I was truly pleased that Rebecca had this experience. She clearly found it to be especially pure and rewarding. Having the opportunity to freely physically share her affection, compassion, and love with her students is something she may never have again. Rebecca's reflection served as a reminder to me about why we teach.

Rebecca's Personal Change/Growth

- Teaching, living, and travelling in Belize taught me so much about myself as a person and teacher. Teaching students from a different culture was obviously an enriching experience, but living in the same community as my students is what made the experience worthwhile: I made special connections with my students because I was able to live the life of a Mayan for an entire month. I ate the same food, swam in the same rivers, walked the same roads, and lived in the same houses. I was living a life that was "harder" than my Canadian life, but I was completely content doing so.
- I didn't realize how content I was until I taught a lesson on happiness to my Infant 1 students. I introduced the lesson with a book called *The Happy Hedgehog* by Marcus Pfister (2003). The book is about a hedgehog who goes on an adventure searching for happiness. On his adventure he meets three animals that are also trying to find happiness. One animal spends all day running to be the fastest (and to him, therefore, the happiest) animal in the woods. One animal spends all day studying to be the smartest (and to him, therefore, the happiest) animal in the woods. And one animal spends all day training to be the strongest (and to him, therefore, the happiest) animal in the woods. The hedgehog tries running, studying, and training but realizes that he is the happiest doing what he enjoys

most—sitting in his own garden at home. The hard-working animals in this book are comparable to me when I live in Canada (striving to accomplish things that will result in happiness). The hedgehog is comparable to me when I was living in Belize (appreciating my surroundings to feel happy in the moment). I'm not saying I wasn't happy in Canada before my trip or I wasn't busy in Belize, but living in a beautiful new country, learning about a new culture, without the constant distractions of home (especially technology) really showed me what being truly content in the moment feels like.

- After my practicum in Belize, I did a lot of reflecting and made a big decision that has drastically changed my future. This decision was to quit my previously secured full-time teaching position in Canada and accept a substitute teaching job in the United Kingdom. I know that, right now in my life, I feel the happiest teaching children from different cultures and travelling to places I have never been. I may not have discovered this feeling of happiness and I definitely wouldn't have made this life-altering decision if I had not travelled to Belize to teach. I am thankful for my experience every day and I will be thankful for the rest of my life.

Dan's Response

Rebecca believed that her personal growth was largely dependent on her being immersed in the community. This international field experience was different than previous ones where pre-service teachers lived off-site in much more comfortable accommodations. It is safe to say that she would not have experienced the same level of personal change/growth had pre-service teachers lived off-site as others have in the past. Rebecca's experience of joy while "going without" so many taken-for-granted and modern luxuries was evidently educative for her. Seemingly, living within the community made all the difference.

It cannot be understated how momentous a decision Rebecca's career change was. It is no secret that the job market for beginning teachers is limited and competitive. Rebecca was one of the few pre-service teachers here who were offered, before graduation, a full-time teaching position in a highly desirable area. Moreover, given her strong references, her demonstrated knowledge, skills, and attributes in her coursework, and her exceptional field experience evaluations, Rebecca was basically given her choice of teaching assignment. Quitting this secured position, a "dream job" for many of her peers, to substitute teach and travel abroad speaks to the epiphany she was only able to have due to her positive international field experience.

Concluding Remarks

Rebecca offers but one perspective and Dan offers but one response. Rebecca's preconceptions, observations, professional change/growth, and personal change/growth are hers only. That said, in many ways her learning experiences were very similar to those that her peers had. Others undoubtedly had some of the same preconceptions, made sense of similar observations, and, through experience and reflection, found that they grew professionally and personally in similar (and different) ways. Attending to more of our pre-service teachers' reflections while immersed in an international field experience would be a worthwhile pursuit.

Though we have attempted to highlight some of the most positive learning experiences related to our international field experience, we are aware that more can be done to improve the entire exercise. We certainly know that all is not necessarily ideal. Presently, we basically have an unarticulated rationale for offering these international field experiences (in Belize or elsewhere). Intuitively and anecdotally, individual faculty members may have a sense or rationale for organizing or supporting such experiences, but little to no discussion (and certainly no policy) has been initiated to define why we ought to be pursuing this sort of field experience in the first place. We offer the international field experience because many of us simply believe it is a good idea. We see some benefits, cited in the literature and also shared by pre-service teachers, like Rebecca and faculty advisors like Dan. The international field experience attracts students to our teacher education program; participating pre-service teachers can learn important educational lessons related to a number of topics (e.g., culturally relevant instruction); and we can enable our in-service teachers to experience significant personal challenge and growth.

Still, questions remain that ought to be asked and addressed. Should our in-service teachers be mentored by "expert" cooperating teachers as they are in Canada? Or are they meant to be the experts themselves, modeling sound pedagogy for less educated and, at times, less experienced mentor teachers as they do in Belize? Should they teach only in their teachable subject areas as is the practice in Canada, or should they teach all subjects to all of their students, as they must in Belize? Given the unique nature of international field experiences, how might expectations for teaching change? Moreover, if expectations ought to be different (and, by all accounts, they already do and/or probably should), then how should formative and summative assessments of our pre-service teachers differ? For what kind of teaching career are we preparing our in-service teachers? A Nova Scotian one? A Canadian one? An international one?

We see these sorts of unanswered questions wanting for attention. Today, pre-service teachers and faculty members are beginning to have these sorts of conversations; some are becoming engaged in genuine discussions about areas for improvement. Indeed, in many ways, this article is a part of this process. In the near future, colleagues will be coming together to research our upcoming international field experiences. We know that the international field experience is not perfect and that there will likely always be room for improvement. That being said, in the meantime, we will continue to do it anyway because we know that it makes a difference.

We would hope that our peers within other teacher education programs might contemplate upon our shared learning experiences so that they may seek ways to provide similar opportunities for their own pre-service teachers. Those who already have similar programs might invite one another into dialogue so that, together, we might learn from one another so as to provide better experiences for all of our pre-service teachers in the future. Moreover, the gathering of voices in this manner, and for this purpose, ought to be open to all of those involved—pre-service teachers, cooperating in-service teachers, and faculty advisors.

Note

1. Herein we have adopted the term “field experience.”

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