



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper discusses the importance of critical reflection in short-term international teacher exchange programs. It draws from the findings of a larger research project investigating teachers' use of comparison as a framework for pedagogical transfer. The paper defines intercultural pedagogical transfer as an educators' engagement with culture through an exchange experience, which forms the context for policy and pedagogical sense making. Here, culture refers to the norms, values, and expectations that inform teaching practice and policy discourses. Participating in an international exchange program involves teachers' reflections on history, culture and policy as the contexts that inform classroom practices. The discussion presented in this paper highlights the importance of critical reflection on teachers' ability to make and sustain changes to practice following an international professional development experience of a Teacher Exchange Program, supported by the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research.

# Centering Reflection in Teachers' International Exchange Experiences

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## Introduction

In the United Arab of Emirates (UAE), the notion of cultural openness and tolerance in social and education spaces has gained momentum in recent years, culminating in 2019 being declared the Year of Tolerance (MyBayut, 2019). In this context, international exchange programs can provide an opportunity for teachers in the UAE to develop and refine intercultural pedagogical practices. This policy paper explores Emirati teachers' experiences in a short-term international professional development program. It highlights the impacts of time and reflection on teachers' experiences in the program and offers recommendations to support pedagogical transfer.

The Teacher Exchange Program (TEP) is part of the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research's (hereafter, Foundation) mission to foster capacity development initiatives for teachers and schools in Ras Al Khaimah. The TEP provides opportunities for government teachers to further skills and knowledge of best practices through collaboration. The TEP's goal is to develop educators' sense of cultural openness as a strategic outcome of the professional development experience. Cultural openness suggests both interest and willingness to interrogate culture as embodied through pedagogies and policies in use within the receiving country (e.g. the country of destination), in this case, Vietnam. The 2018 TEP was facilitated through a cohort model. A cohort of Emiratis working in public schools and in the Ministry of Education (MOE) were purposefully recruited to form the participant group. Nineteen Emirati educators, 10 women and 9 men, in addition to several Foundation and partner staff took part in the week-long exchange trip to Vietnam in March 2018. All female participants self-identified as classroom teachers, whereas all male participants self-identified as administrators, curriculum managers, or MOE delegates.

Applicants were required to have completed two professional development activities offered by the Foundation as a prerequisite for participation. Foundation staff then assessed their applications. Once selected for the TEP, participants were required to complete a pre-departure workshop on problem-of-practice inquiry. Problem-of-practice inquiry is understood, broadly, as an approach to action research that focuses on a classroom or school-level issue within the educators' locus of control to change (Mills, 2007). The pre-departure workshop served as an introduction to the TEP and problem-of-practice project that participants would complete and present to MOE stakeholders after the exchange trip. Teachers' self-selected topics ranged from the use of information and communication technology for instruction, strategies to promote parental involvement, to practices that could support student performance on international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

## Teacher Exchange Program Activities

During their pre-departure workshop, educators were invited to identify a problem of practice that they would interrogate using comparison as a context for inquiry. Using comparison as a context of inquiry seeks not only to understand other cultures, but to "understand how we know and represent other cultures [and their practices] through the construction of knowledge" (Cummings, 2014, p. 128).

The in-country fieldwork activities planned for the Emirati teachers' short-term stay included cultural sightseeing excursions, school observations and teacher training site visits, and meetings with Vietnamese Ministry of Education delegates. Cohort members maintained regular communication before, during, and after the exchange experience using a closed WhatsApp group chat. The group chat provided a conduit for in-country logistics and activities before and during the exchange, and a space to sustain cohort members' relationships after the Vietnam trip. Staff affiliated with the sponsoring partner in UAE facilitated simultaneous translation during outbound exchange activities. Participants' opportunity for reflection was embedded into the week-long exchange trip in the form of daily journal writing and illustrations completed at the close of each day's field activities (Harold & Stevenson, 2010; Stephenson, Dada & Harold, 2012) facilitated by TEP staff.

## Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

A wide-ranging body of literature on reflection exists in the context of teachers' professional development. However, less is known about the role of critical reflection on pedagogical transfer following an international experience. The purpose of this brief review of the literature, therefore, is to harmonize findings from teacher-focused, professional development scholarship in the areas of critical reflection and intercultural education, broadly, to inform this study's aims and outcomes. International professional development and training experiences can support teachers' cultural openness and global mindedness (Maynes, Allison & Julien-Schultz, 2012). These were two of the informal learning outcomes of the TEP. In the next section, I draw from the literature on critical reflection in collaborative professional development settings to highlight the importance of contextualization to support international pedagogical transfer.

### Critical Reflection in Collaborative Professional Development

I apply Brookfield's (2008) understanding of critical reflection as the interrogation of "power relationships that allow, or promote, one particular set of practices over others" (p. 294). Brookfield speaks of "recognizing and researching assumptions" behind thoughts and actions

in ordinary situations that create our lives (2008, p. 295). As a process, critical reflection is situated "outside the classroom and away from academic disciplines and divisions and places it squarely in the centre [sic] of our experiences" (Brookfield, 2008, p. 295). Utilizing criticality becomes even more important for the TEP participant who may experience cultural distance and dissonance during school-based observations and activities in a new culture. Commensurately, Ahn (2020) finds through her work with teachers of English from other language backgrounds that criticality can enable teachers' engagement with identity and culture through reflection. Ahn (2016) concludes that participating in critical reflective practices allows teachers to be better able to use the same approaches with their students in classrooms, contributing to "small changes in their society." (p. 78).

Like Brookfield (2008), Fox, Dodman & Holincheck (2019) caution that not all reflection is critical. They find that, without a critical framework applied to reflective journal prompts or debrief activities, teachers are more likely to just report on their experiences than they are to practice positionality or reflexivity throughout the writing process. Without criticality, they argue, teachers' reflections are likely to describe their experiences in ways that reinforce their own social identities and worldviews. The risk of reinforcing cultural stereotypes through international exchange programs becomes greater without cultural orientation and debrief (Fox, Dodman & Holincheck, 2019). Structured opportunities to practice critical reflection skills during the exchange experience, are essential to support teachers' broader understanding of cultural openness in pedagogical transfer practices. One way of mitigating this risk is to center reflection in each day's activities. This specific recommendation from the literature is taken-up in the discussion of findings that follows.

### Criticality, Collaboration, and Contextualization

Teachers' participation in cohort-based, internationally focused professional development is a relatively new practice model in both Vietnam and the UAE. Nguyen (2017) and Bui (2013) note that within-school professional development does not always enable teachers' navigation of the cultural, political, social, and pedagogical spheres that influence transfer (Nguyen, 2017; Bui, 2013; Saito & Atencio, 2013). Criticality and collaboration can support teachers' experiences with culture during the exchange activities. Criticality and collaboration can also sustain changes to practice following the exchange experience. Together, the literature on teachers' reflective practices and collaborative professional development models suggest that TEP participants may require specific and dedicated opportunities to develop critical reflection to promote pedagogical transfer (Lee, 2005).

Teachers' engagement with formal professional development varies in the UAE and Vietnam. This variance

is informed by the availability of resources to support public education infrastructure at the national and subnational levels. Teachers' engagement is also driven by the policy priorities of interest to both countries, respectively. The impact of resource availability and policy priorities on teachers' access to professional development helps to explain the variance in teachers' engagement. For example, the Emirati teacher participants in this study confirmed that they are required to complete 100 hours of professional development each year. The focus on assessment in Emirati educators' professional development activities evidences the UAE's attention to PISA 2021 in its larger education agenda, as well as the availability and deployment of resources to support teachers' professional development. In contrast, teachers in the reciprocal exchange from Vietnam advised that they receive significantly less access to professional development and training. Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka's (2008) study of teachers in Vietnam supports this finding. Vietnamese teachers may require specific training to develop metacognitive and communication strategies to evaluate their own practices (Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka, 2008).

Returning to Brookfield (2009), criticality can prime teachers' attention to context and culture during their in-country field activities. Criticality, on its own, however is not enough to promote intercultural pedagogical transfer. Because of the collaborative nature of the cohort approach used in the TEP, it is important that teachers can effectively collaborate within groups and with the entire cohort. Teacher-to-teacher collaboration, in turn, can be leveraged to scale changes from TEP alumni to the school-level. As the literature reviewed, in brief, suggests, criticality is essential in any reflective endeavor. It is exponentially important in activities that are comparative and/or international in scope. In the findings section, I highlight the importance of criticality in teachers' ability to transfer practices from another national context to their own classrooms.

## Data and Methods

The study that foregrounds this policy paper investigates teachers' use of comparison as a framework for reflection during short-term international professional development experiences.<sup>1</sup>

In total, 19 educators participated in the Vietnam TEP. The analysis of journal data was reduced from all participants to only those that consented to be interviewed in follow-up to the Vietnam exchange trip. The refined sample includes completed journal entries and individual interviews with a

subsample of six Vietnam TEP participants. The qualitative analysis procedures (Creswell, 2006) used to organize and analyze Emirati TEP participants' reflective journals are discussed immediately below.

## Reflective Journals

Emirati participants completed an autoethnographic journaling assignment during the Vietnam TEP. Journaling, especially when used in a role for priming criticality, is a tool for "deconstructing events to make sense of them" and also aids in "integrating experiences, problem solving, and stress reduction" (Lowe, Prout & Murica, 2013, p. 6). Seven journal entries were assigned to be completed at the end of each day's fieldwork. The prompts were inclusive of pre-reflection, during-reflection, and post-reflection experiences. In total, 31 journal entries from six participants were included for analysis. The journal entries were coded in three iterative rounds, yielding 110 unique excerpts, 55 codes (inclusive of major and subcodes), and 554 unique code applications.

All journal prompts were provided in Arabic and packaged in a booklet made available to TEP participants before departing for Vietnam. The booklet also included informed consent forms and information about the research project. All study participants completed the written consent forms. All reflections and consent forms were then back translated from Arabic to English for analysis and archival.

## Findings

Critical reflection can enable greater engagement with culture during an international professional development experience. Drawing from my analysis of Emirati TEP participants' journals, the findings discussed in this section focus on two related themes: the role of time in teachers' international professional development experiences and teachers' engagement in affective reflection practices.

## Acceleration

The teacher exchange program under study in this policy paper was facilitated in a short-term, cohort model. The in-country stays for the UAE and Vietnam groups were six days each. Only the Emirati cohort participated in a pre-departure orientation that included a reflective component. Therefore, one of this study's goals is to consider how time – in terms of participants' length of stay as well as how time is structured during the exchange – may affect teachers' engagement with reflection (Conway, et al., 2012). Because of the accelerated nature of the TEP, program leaders focused on the importance of "cultural openness" as a strategic outcome of the exchange

<sup>1</sup> Both the exchange program and the research study discussed in this policy paper are supported by the Al Qasimi Foundation.

experience. Striking the balance between cultural sharing experiences with professional development opportunities presents a significant challenge for international professional development models. Yet, great effort was made to integrate both types of experiences in the TEP.

Teachers' expectations for their experience in Vietnam ultimately shaped how they reflected on time. Teachers who wrote that they expected to participate in cultural and site-seeing opportunities were more likely than other participants to discuss time as a challenge in their daily journals. When teachers explicitly wrote about time as a challenge, they noted not having enough time to complete their problem-of-practice projects, to communicate with family and colleagues back home in the UAE, or to engage in informal cultural activities like sightseeing and shopping. One teacher recommended that, for future exchange trips, "one day for tourism and entertainment should be prearranged as it is necessary to remove work pressure and exhaustion of continuous tours, and to give a positive psychological [outcomes for the] participants."

Time to practice critical reflection skills were integrated into the 2018 TEP through journal prompts. Participants convened at the close of each day's activities to discuss and express their responses to the journal prompt assigned for that day. Illustrations and text were options as modes of reflective expression that participants could use for the purpose of their daily journals. These reflection sessions were informal, meaning that individual participants met in small groups or on their own to discuss their reflections. Together, these selected findings highlight the ways in which teachers differently experienced time – first as a resource that could be leveraged to support their TEP outcomes and then as opportunities for leisure and cultural immersion.

## Affective Reflection

The thematic analysis of individual participants' journals also indicated another mode of reflective expression – affective reflection. Where critical reflection requires an interrogation of power in context to the policies and practices that inform experience (Brookfield, 2019), affective reflection does not attend to the structural and institutional forces that shape teachers' professional lives. Instead, it signals teachers' awareness of difference without personalization or contextualization to their own classroom contexts. Here, a teacher uses affective reflection to communicate their experience in the TEP:

What attracted my attention is that in spite of the great number of the population, they live in peace, serve themselves by themselves, and support each other. I have not seen two people quarreling. They eat modest food with no exaggeration, they wear simple clothes, and they are always smiling, friendly, and hospitable with visitors.

As evidenced in the preceding passage, affective reflection refers to participants' use of rich, emotive descriptions of their experiences in the TEP. Affective reflection reframes the narrative to communicate good will through cultural exchange. Here, another teacher uses affective reflection to recount their visit to a rural primary school in the Vietnam countryside:

I liked how students had responsibilities during going home time, the cleanliness at school, and the in-class cooperation. I like the principal's interest in training new teachers and urging the teachers to continue their studies to elevate the teaching process.

Critical reflection is, thus, necessary for teachers to contextualize pedagogical practices observed during the exchange experience. As Fox, Dodman & Holincheck (2019) remind, simply asking teachers to reflect on their experiences, without criticality, may ultimately reinforce existing cultural biases. Instead, teachers require both formal and informal opportunities to practice critical reflection during TEP experiences to support and sustain pedagogical transfer (Colón-Muñiz, SooHoo & Brignoni, 2010).

## Recommendations

My analysis suggests that affective reflection may be an initial stage of a larger sense-making process that teachers experience during short-term international professional development activities. Better institutionalizing routine, rest, and reflection as scheduled activities could further support teachers' critical reflection and subsequent transfer.

Time is at a premium during short-term international programs like the TEP. Both Foundation staff and participants from the 2018 exchange group reported difficulty finding balance between cultural and informational exchange activities with rest and reflection during the week abroad. As highlighted in this policy paper's findings, travel-related fatigue, coupled with language and cultural immersion, may negatively affect participants' abilities to contextualize the practices they observe during classroom visitations and through end-of-day facilitated reflection activities. The two recommendations outlined in the following discussion center rest as a necessary condition for reflection and knowledge transfer.

### 1. Rest to Prime Reflection

Emirati teachers remarked on the need for down time to process their experiences, while still maintaining a robust and differentiated schedule of activities. As noted, the goal of the TEP, as expressed by Foundation leaders, is to develop educators' sense of cultural openness as a strategic outcome of the exchange experience. Institutionalizing routine, rest, and reflection as scheduled activities could better enable this interrogation of culture, embodied in pedagogical practices and intercultural transfer.

## 2. Advanced Organizers as Structural Supports

Advanced organizers are systems and structures to prime experience and expectations. As such, they may provide TEP participants with a framework that better enables their intercultural pedagogical transfer. One way to embed advanced organizers into the TEP schedule is to use whole-group mini-meetings to begin each day. These mini-meetings would introduce the day's activities, create space for participants' questions and feedback, and introduce specific learning objectives that would be interrogated as part of the end-of-day reflection or as part of their summative project outcome (Colón-Muñiz, SooHoo & Brignoni, 2010; Conway et al., 2012).

Meals are regularly incorporated into exchange activities as opportunities for cultural sharing. Thus, participants may require some orientation to the foods and customs they will encounter as part of their time in-country. Mealtimes will need to be incorporated into the schedule of activities when not part of school and other site visits. In addition, blocking an hour after lunch for rest and reflection may yield greater engagement during end-of-day, whole-group facilitated reflection sessions (Lowe, Prout & Murica, 2013).

## Conclusion

In summary, this policy paper suggests that critical reflection is essential to practice transfer following short-term, international professional development experiences. Both formal and informal opportunities for reflection are necessary to support pedagogical transfer following an international professional development experience. Intercultural pedagogical transfer requires critical reflection, which can be difficult to facilitate during short-term experiences.

The journal prompts were purposefully constructed to enable participants' practice of critical reflection skills. The prompts were scaffolded throughout the week to explore participants' expectations, their experiences, and any challenges they faced during the day's activities. The lag in participants' engagement with critical reflection further supports the need for pre-departure cultural orientation, as well as structured opportunities to practice critical reflection skills during the exchange experience.

Because the UAE employs a large number of expatriate teachers, especially in boys' schools (Ridge 2010; Ridge 2009; Kirk & Napier, 2009), future research is needed in order to explore how expatriate teachers working in the UAE understand critical reflection as pedagogical practice, and to identify strategies to scale transfer following teachers' international exchange experience beyond the classroom level. Together, this research will help to inform teacher education and professional development in the UAE and in the GCC region.

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