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## Differences that matter: Boundary experiences in student teachers' intercultural learning



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### ABSTRACT

This case study explored examples of pre-service teachers' learning when experiencing discontinuity and (re)positioning themselves in various professional communities and cultures during an international teaching internship. Pre-service teachers' experiences of discontinuity were defined as boundary experiences, when challenging or problematic socio-cultural differences significantly influenced their (inter)actions. Pre-service teachers' attempts to (re)position themselves in the unfamiliar professional and cultural contexts are described as a state of continuity and examples of boundary crossing. Learning mechanisms of identification, coordination, reflection and transformation in the theory of boundary crossing were used to analyze 15 boundary experiences. The four learning mechanisms provided insight into how a multi-level approach (including personal, professional and cultural aspects) gives a more nuanced perspective on the dominant adjustment paradigm. The value of a boundary experience for pre-service teachers' learning during an international teaching experience resided mostly in raising awareness of existing, often taken-for-granted, personal and professional beliefs and their ability to switch between cultural and professional perspectives. The 15 boundary experiences in this study suggest that educators could focus more on pre-service teachers' coping strategies, existential questions and cultural negotiation when they experience discontinuity, in addition to the current focus on learning outcomes, transformations, or cultural fit.

### Introduction

The moment you begin your international teaching internship you are tested in things where you believe in, in what you do, in what you find important, if you want to sustain those beliefs and skills. You are tested if you have enough flexibility to find a compromise, so you don't get into a tight corner in this other culture. During my Dutch internship I learned about the Dutch system, the Dutch curriculum, the power distance towards pupils. You have this experience, you know how it works in the Netherlands, but now you go to this international environment. Let's see how you manage there and how you professionally develop and grow. Can you make it? Are you personally and professionally flexible enough to make a compromise and find your place in a different system and culture? (Suzanne, pre-service teacher).

During an international teaching internship, pre-service teachers not only experience what it means to move between various educational practices (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), but also what it means to move across geographical, political, cultural, and linguistic borders (Marginson, 2014). An international teaching internship gives students the opportunity to compare and reflect upon their professional practice and teaching knowledge and examine other

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sociocultural aspects of education (Lough, Sherraden, & Moore McBride, 2012; Marx & Moss, 2011; Pagano & Roselle, 2009). Pre-service teachers are frequently confronted with multiple cultural opinions that question their professional beliefs. Education abroad interrupts the obvious and the familiar and one is forced to take a step back and address substantial changes and challenges in abbreviated time periods (Biesta, 2010; English, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2009; Marginson, 2014).

When pre-service teachers teach abroad, they are often caught between the familiar and unfamiliar, the expected and unanticipated, or the culturally known and unknown (Dunlap & Webster, 2009; Montgomery, 2010). These situations of friction and challenges have learning potential and are often important moments for the beginning teachers' growth (Conway, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2009; Pillen, Beijaard, & Den Brok, 2013). Kelchtermans (2009, p. 266) describes these situations as moments of vulnerability—discomforting situations, where teachers are exposed to distress, with “the passive dimension of undergoing, surprise, puzzlement and powerlessness”. He considers these situations as essential moments in the development of personal and teaching scholarship. Meijer (2011) argues that these challenges in a teacher's development (she describes as a crisis) should even be provoked as catalysts for a teacher's learning.

For teacher educators interested in student learning during unpredictable moments, or situations of vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2009), an international teaching internship is potentially a significant experience. How students deal with socio-cultural differences and challenges without their familiar social and academic infrastructure is considered key in their learning during a stay abroad (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Marginson, 2014; Montgomery, 2010). Educators have abundant knowledge regarding students' learning outcomes after a stay abroad, such as language acquisition (cf. Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012), intercultural skills (cf. Deardorff, Pysarchick, & Yun, 2009), or intercultural sensitivity (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Hammer, 2012). However, the complex nature of a cross-cultural experience makes it difficult to fully understand how individual students learn. There are relatively few empirical studies that describe how students' learning actually takes place in cross-cultural situations where they perceive tensions and challenges, especially in vocational education and training (Chang, Yuan, & Chuang, 2013; Engberg, 2013; Fee & Gray, 2013; Tran, 2012). Holmes and O'Neill (2012, p. 708) stress that most studies on intercultural competencies lack focus on individual agency and the role of thought processes—introspection, self-reflection, and interpretation. Gonzalez-Loureiro, Kiessling, and Dabic (2015, p. 248) suggest that a multi-level approach incorporating work and home experiences is key for understanding the multifaceted nature of a stay abroad. Marginson (2014, p. 6) argues that the experience of complexity is inevitable in an international context because students who experience something new and unfamiliar in a cross-cultural setting experience learning that is new and unpredictable.

In this case study, we describe and analyze problematic and challenging experiences during an international teaching internship as pre-service teachers' attempt to position themselves in an unfamiliar professional and cultural context and its significance for their professional development. We are specifically interested in determining where learning opportunities are evoked during the pre-service teachers' attempts to manage the discontinuity they experience as a result of problematic or challenging socio-cultural differences during their international internships (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; English, 2013).

### **Boundary experiences during an international internship socio-cultural differences, discontinuity and a boundary experience**

Pre-service teachers who move between various cultures and practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000) during an international teaching internship are likely to encounter socio-cultural differences that vary from differences in cultural habits, communication, and school culture to teaching strategies (e.g. Jang & Kim, 2010; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). Students can perceive socio-cultural differences as problematic and causing tension and distress (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). For example, Adler (1975) and Oberg (1960) describe how individuals can perceive culture shock during a stay abroad that causes major psychological distress. Educators generally expect that cross-cultural obstacles and challenges will function as a trigger for student learning (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Kim, 2001; Zhou et al., 2008).

Pre-service teachers who perceive socio-cultural differences as an obstacle or challenge experience discontinuity (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Whether or not a pre-service teacher perceives a socio-cultural difference as discontinuity is subjective and depends on the person and the situation (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; English, 2013). English (2013, p. 114) describes how experiences of discontinuity are physical, emotional or even existential moments when an individual encounters something new or unfamiliar. This encounter disturbs the individual's planned or desired course. Akkerman and Bakker (2011, p. 133) define discontinuity as a problematic or challenging socio-cultural difference that stands in the way of how a person wants to interact or act. For example, a pre-service teacher may have a different perspective on teaching methodology than her colleagues at a school in another country. This experience becomes an obstacle when a pre-service teacher starts to feel distressed, for instance, when local procedures and expectations allow no space for maneuvering. This distress can be felt in teacher-student interactions or when preparing lessons.

A boundary is a common notion for describing a geographical dividing line between nations. An individual experiences a boundary when he or she moves from one country to another. In the theory of boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Engeström et al., 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991) a boundary is used as metaphor for experiences of discontinuity, which hinder a person's ability to function properly during an international teaching internship (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, 2012). Chirkov (2009, p. 95) argues that in the process of acculturation “when people were initially socialized in one cultural environment and then moved and started functioning in another one, offers an opportunity to research these quintessential questions of the interaction of agentic individuals with constraining and controlling social and cultural demands”. English (2013) also stresses how experiencing discontinuity can simultaneously open opportunities for new ideas and modes of practices. Therefore, a boundary can be considered as an example of a threshold concept that can initiate a new way of understanding, interpreting or viewing something (Meyer & Land, 2003; Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 373).

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