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## **Book Review - Narratives of Learning through International Professional Experience**

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Ange Fitzgerald, Graham Parr and Judy Williams (eds.) (2017) Singapore: Springer

The book, *Narratives of Learning through International Professional Experience*, edited by Fitzgerald, Parr and Williams (2017) provides compelling evidence that practicum placements in diverse cultural settings illuminate and inspire new understandings of participants including pre-service teachers, faculty facilitators and host mentor educators. Through the lens of a narrative inquiry methodology, the contents of each chapter present complex stories with interwoven themes all focussed on a range of International Professional Experiences (IPE) of the Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia. The reader travels through Italy, Malaysia, Cook Islands, Israel and South Africa, sharing the experiences, tensions, fears and celebrations that are inherent in international teaching placements. Each chapter is written with a unique perspective, thus, enlightening the reader of the intricate responsibilities involved in planning and partaking in practicum opportunities abroad.

The invaluable reflections and cautions in *Narratives of Learning Through Professional Experience* both affirm and alert faculty facilitators of their important roles. A quote describing the ambivalence of this position is aptly stated by Fitzgerald in Chapter 2. “As I reflect on the continuous shifting that occurred between my roles of learner and leader, it becomes apparent that this experience was much less about changing myself to manage a situation, and much more about adopting a constantly evolving sense of self.” (p. 25). This ‘dance of assuming both leader and learner roles’ resonated with me since I established and facilitated a practicum to Italy that was sustained for twelve consecutive years (in spite of an earthquake in our L’Aquila location). As a faculty facilitator, I was continually assuming intertwined leadership and learner roles as our practicum experiences evolved and changed over time. It is assuring to explore and analyze the stories provided in *Narratives of Learning Through International Professional Experience* as a vehicle to better understand the uncertainty and excitement experienced through the cyclical processes of leading and learning throughout international placements.

The key messages permeating throughout this book include: the need for a flexible approach to learning; the importance of valuing host schools and cultures; the pertinence of organization and preparation and; the inevitable presence of “provocation and ambiguity when working in intercultural contexts” (p.42). With reference to a practicum in Kuala Lumpur, the participating faculty conclude, “...without this level of discomfort, we may not have experienced as much growth in our intercultural competency and we certainly would not have gained such a strong understanding of that growth. This discomfort allowed us each to achieve an increased awareness and understanding of what we as accompanying academics can gain from these international placement opportunities while supporting our pre-service teachers”(pp. 43-44). It is evident that, ironically, international placements need both meticulous preparation

with formal structures, in addition to flexible expectations and open-ended experiences, to allow for learning, growth and development.

*Narratives of Learning through International Professional Experience*, interestingly also includes the perceptions of participating mentor host teachers, giving voice to the experiences of educators who invite pre-service teachers into their classrooms and school settings. In Chapter 6, the authors are faculty from Oranim College in Israel who co-designed and supervised the International Practicum Experience with faculty from Monash University. They interviewed host mentor-teachers who reported that their interactions with Australian pre-service teachers gifted them and their young students with the opportunity to learn about a foreign culture. “The pre-service teachers bring into the lives of their mentor-teachers and their school students an unforgettable experience of a foreign country, foreign culture and foreign language while negotiating meaning in the process.” (p. 92). This benefit to the host school is sometimes questioned yet, it is reassuring to read that even the children welcomed the visiting Australian pre-service teacher. “They hung an Australian flag, wrote Welcome and her name in English.” (p. 88). Of course, the benefits and challenges derived by host schools are dependent on many variables such as continuous and reciprocal relationships, thus presenting ethical dilemmas as acknowledged in Chapter 4. “...there are valuable synergies when a practicum programme and individuals in that practicum are aware of the dangers of narrow self-interest and yet are willing to engage in genuine transcultural dialogue across difference and reflection about the possibilities of ethical praxis.” (p. 60). Interestingly, the narratives presented in every chapter are indicative of the reflective dialogues of individuals involved in resolving ethical questions and issues as guests in host schools.

It is very commendable that Chapter 10 of *Narratives of Learning through International Professional Experience* is co-authored by a faculty facilitator and two pre-service teachers giving credence to the importance of self-reflection on the part of ‘student teachers’. They conclude that sharing a practicum allowed them to gain new skills and knowledge. “The lasting benefits of our IPE include that we doubt that we will prejudge a person’s cultural background, linguistic difference or even learning ability. We think we will be more inclined to have greater patience and empathy. We have greater personal courage and confidence.” (p. 150). The close relationships developed among participants of an international practicum and the positive effects are obviously very strong and long-lasting.

*Narratives of Learning through International Professional Experience* is an excellent resource for teacher educators, international departments of universities and colleges, academics interested in the issues related to international work-integrated learning and of course, to students who are either planning to participate in an international placement or have had the privilege to teach in an international setting. The use of stories and journal entries recounting personal and professional experiences is a powerful way to present the benefits and challenges of travelling to a new country with a group of pre-service teachers for the purpose of gaining pedagogical and cultural competencies. The editors have carefully selected and presented various viewpoints to create an intricate and colourful kaleidoscope of these valuable undertakings. The reader is privy to the emotional impacts, cultural learnings, ethical issues and practical implications of international placements. The only feature that would enhance the book, *Narratives of Learning through International Professional Experience*, might be a summary chapter outlining ‘Effective Features of a Successful IPE’. Perhaps such a synthesis is left for the reader’s interpretation. One wonders if the summative piece could be included in a second edition or form a sequel book for further consideration? Overall, *Narratives of Learning through International Professional*

*Experience* makes a significant contribution to the field of experiential learning and particularly exemplifies the unique merits of providing immersion in a new cultural school setting within pre-service teacher education programs.