

Friendships Overcome Ignorance and Misconceptions: Teacher Candidates' Exposure to a Foreign Culture in an Online Cross-national e-pals Project

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The cross-national pedagogical e-pal project was implemented between teacher candidates in the United States and the United Arab Emirates with the purpose of expanding teacher candidates' perspectives on culture. During the five weeks of the intervention, in teams of three, participants had informal online conversations and discussed schooling scenarios to illuminate and articulate their decision-making. In this study, the teacher candidates' views were captured in pre- and post-surveys, in their posts, and in their reflection responses. All data were analyzed to understand the change in their views on their culture and their partner's culture as well as any newly developed perspectives on culture. The findings indicated a shift in their views toward a more in-depth understanding of cultures.

Keywords: culturally responsive, intervention, Muslim, perspectives on culture, teacher education

Introduction

Biased cultural assumptions existing within teacher perceptions might create the potential for the use of inequitable pedagogical practices. Moreover, cultural phobias may solidify barriers between majority and minority members of a population. For example, any Islamophobia in schools may contribute to negative acculturation experiences amongst Muslim children in the USA or in any Western countries (Kunst, Sadeghi, Tahir, Sam, & Thomsen, 2016; Mazrui, 2005). Likewise, any Americophobia may contribute to negative acculturation experiences amongst American children attending schools abroad, e.g., in Muslim countries (Mazrui, 2005).

Teachers in the USA tend to lack knowledge of Islam, which hinders their actions for maintaining safe and stable learning environments for children, regardless of their religion and culture (Hoot, Szecsi, & Moosa, 2003; Marque et al., 2018; Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002). Acknowledging religious diversity as an aspect of multicultural education might fail to address the significant gaps in knowledge of other cultures (Marks, Binkley, & Daly, 2014). Therefore, recognizing the potential for teachers to maintain a narrow interpretation of multicultural education calls for a global curriculum to be utilized in schools (Agirdag, Merry & Van Houtte, 2016). Teaching an ever-changing, multicultural curriculum requires educators to maintain an ongoing effort to infuse global considerations into all aspects of the curriculum.

Even in highly diverse communities, people still tend to associate with individuals who have a relatively similar racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic background to their own (Sleeter, 2001). With a lack of exposure to diversity, some teachers believe they have no culture (Duffy et al., 2018; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007). This perspective tends to be particularly predominate amongst individuals who have never been considered a minority in their own country (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007). For example, some teacher candidates have said, "I am white. I do not have a culture" (Garcia, 2002, p.73). While exploring opinions of diversity amongst teacher candidates in Australia, Forrest, Lean & Dunn (2016) found that teachers' attitudes toward teaching cultural diversity topics were supportive, though the knowledge of methods for implementing associated practices highly varied. In this Forrest et al. investigation (2016), teachers working in low-income areas were more likely to use supportive diversity practices i.e. multicultural curriculum and strategies to reduce discrimination. Also, stereotypical thinking, deficit theories about culture, and technical-rational problem solving were documented in a self-study of the outcomes in an online education course to prepare teachers for diversity (Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008). While collaborating in peer-led dialogues online only a few students engaged in critical reflection (Wade et. al., 2018). The

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evidence from these studies suggests that cultural assumptions exist within teacher perceptions regarding a need for diversification in teacher education. Yet, based on the data from one hundred thirty-six teacher participants in a self-reported questionnaire, teachers who believe immigrant students enhance their classroom tend to have lower burnout ratings and higher self-efficacy scores (Corona et al, 2017; Gutentag, Horenczyk, & Tatar, 2017).

Teachers benefit from understanding aspects of their own culture before forming beliefs about diverse cultural norms and individual complexities (Banks, 2006; Faltis, 2014; Kaya, 2015). To support this learning journey for cultural knowledge, some teacher education courses offer interventions with teacher candidates' self-analysis of his or her own culture (Alanay & Aydin, 2016). These interventions include transformative activities such as the creation of a 'cultural backpack' in which teacher candidates add objects and drawings that represent their deep culture and in accordance to the metaphor purported, they unpack their backpacks in front of the class (Cáceda & Guerra, 2017; Domingo, & Guerrero, 2018).

This article reports on the communication between teacher candidates' (TCs') in two different universities and courses, and highlights their perception of culture as it evolved in an online cross-cultural diversity education intervention. The intervention was designed to offer TCs an opportunity to explore their own culture, learn about the culture of a colleague from another country, and critically think of, and reflect on educational scenarios in a culturally responsive manner. This article details the process we undertook. First, we outline the theoretical framework based on which the intervention and the study were designed. Next, we share additional literature on other interventions related to our topic. Then, we report the findings in terms of TCs' perception of their own culture and their partners' culture, and their newly gained knowledge about culture as demonstrated in their communication and self-reflection. We conclude the paper with recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

Although teachers from different nations conceptualize childhood and the quality of childcare in similar philosophical ways, the attempts to meet those aspirations produce highly diverse outcomes in each nation (Hujala, Vlasov, & Szecsi, 2017; Vlasov, Hujala, Essary, & Lenskaya, 2016). Teacher's perceptions of culture influence their understanding of childhood and child development. Moreover, each schooling scenario involves sociocultural-contextual complexities, which have the potential to influence a teachers' pedagogical decision-making. Although childhood is widely perceived as a consistent developmental period with universal similarities, it is critical to note that, despite universal patterns in development, childhood is a diverse experience. A central feature of the concept of schooling is that each school is a cultural entity made up of other cultural influences (e.g. society). Indeed, classroom culture develops within a context and context develops out of culture. It is up to the teacher to anticipate the variety of socio-cultural factors within each daily interaction/episode, and engage in a culturally responsive investigation of additional considerations before making decisions, which impact the pedagogical relationships within their classrooms (Inceli, 2015; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004). With the understanding that homogeneity in teacher leadership stifles TC skill development such as information processing, creativity, and problem-solving (Halpern, 2017; Hujala, Waniganayake & Rodd, 2013; Michou et al, 2016), we theorize that when designed effectively (i.e., encouraging multiple perspectives and genuine cooperation) cross-national pre-service teacher opportunities to solve case studies can influence activity for diversity teacher preparation.

Researchers in diversity teacher preparation must extend beyond the limited analysis of student's responses into categories of accomplishment (e.g., lower order, transitional, higher order) (Arslan & Yigit, 2016; Monroe & Ruan, 2018; Yigit & Tatch, 2017). Teacher beliefs tend to influence teachers' pedagogy more than their objective knowledge (Ethell & McMeniman, 2002). Therefore, investigations about how the teacher candidates experience interventions to enhance their intercultural awareness and recognize the cultural human resources they provide are warranted. Therefore, this study considers teachers' backgrounds and beliefs as resources which can contribute to intracultural and intercultural collaboration, within a multicultural and global education curriculum. This approach takes the researcher beyond simply collecting and analyzing evidence of accomplishment within a developmental trajectory. Resources which, when utilized to take on multiple vantage points, can assist a teacher in examining particular classroom scenarios that tend to arise in a variety of contexts. This theoretical framework suggests that all teachers are naturally able to explore sociocultural interactions because all teachers are cultural beings. However, it is up to the individual to seek and develop understanding, and/or friendships instead of phobias.

Diversity Teacher Preparation Interventions

Addressing teacher cultural competency in the classroom involves designing diversity preparation coursework that assists TCs in adequately reacting to cases with a deep understanding of attitudes and beliefs of each child's culture. Although the nature of global migration has shifted dramatically in the past few decades, a lack of opportunities for ongoing interaction with diverse populations is still the reality in many communities around the world. In segregated areas the lack of access or familiarity with other cultures restricts teacher preparation programs because immersion placements are often unavailable. Despite the challenges, programs must move beyond the teacher's understanding of their own culture to help them make meaning of diverse cultures (Gutentag, Horenczyk, & Tatar, 2017; Hujala, Waniganayake & Rodd, 2013)

Recently, diversity teacher preparation interventions have expanded in the United States. In these interventions, among other learning opportunities, activities involve role play/intercultural communication simulations (Park & Essary, 2011; Zamboanga, Ham, Tomaso, Audley, & Pole, 2016), opportunities to analyze media (Miretzky, 2017), autobiography activities (Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Petersen, & Welsh, 2013) lectures with multicultural education readings, and face-to-face discussions in class (Acquah & Commins, 2017; James, 2018; Waters & Russell, 2016). Furthermore a recommended writing process includes a three step process of 1) writing an autobiography, 2) including a biography of someone from a different ethnicity or home language, and 3) creating a VennDiagram to compare the similarities and differences between the cultures (Miller & Fuller, 2006; Monroe & Ruan, 2018). In fact, online interventions for learning about other cultures are included in some of these activities. For example, pre-service teachers receive advice from in-service teachers working in Egypt, Japan, Ghana, and the U.S. in one synchronous online intervention (Lacina & Sowa, 2005). In another study, smartphone recorded online interview opportunities are set up between TCs and with individuals from other nations (Tuttle, 2014). Also, some courses have embedded systematic assignments for online discussion among peers Christian & Zippay, 2012; Paulus & Roberts, 2006). In addition, it is common for courses to include peer-led diversity conversation opportunities for preservice teachers (Nancy & Zeni, 2004; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008). These opportunities can include synchronous discussions between teachers in an online format (Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2009), and dialog journaling that provides an open reflection on particular teaching experiences (Ruan & Beach, 2005). All of the aforementioned studies used an online platform intended to support learning, with mixed success. Asynchronous programs provided more positive results than the synchronous experiences, because the participants had time to think and respond, as opposed to reacting in real-time. However, none of these research studies involved TCs from different nations responding to diverse case studies of teaching and learning in a predominately asynchronous online format. This intervention was designed to address this gap in the literature.

Teacher education programs intend to challenge and transform teacher candidates' views about culture, race, and ethnicity as it pertains to both individual as well as group differences (CAEP, 2018). As educational pedagogists, teachers must make meaning of the visible and invisible culture of their students. In doing so, teachers must come to realize that any item may concern culture, and this warrants caution in regards to the fluid nature of interpreting artifacts or words that may appear to represent the surface culture. As discussed, attending lectures and reading books is, arguably, not enough. Interventions hardly address both deep and surface culture. Definition of deep and surface culture suggests that surface culture involves the visible, tangible features of the culture such as food, music, and dances; however, deep culture involves beliefs, values and moral standards (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). However, even this breakdown remains too simplistic. Because culture is value-dependent; even tangible items can have deeper meanings. Although an etic analytic perspective might consider the word usage amongst TCs to be surface oriented, the emic analytic perspective highlights awareness of the deep cultural meaning of seemingly surface objects (e.g., dates as a food staple as well as eating dates as a religious practice). Moreover, even the visible elements of culture (i.e., surface culture) may represent strong belief sets (i.e., deep culture). Therefore a teacher may be aware of surface culture without deep cultural awareness. This current study examines teacher candidates self-reported understanding of the surface and deep aspects of culture.

Methodology

This concurrent mixed methods intervention was implemented with TCs in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and TCs in Florida, the United States. All participants were enrolled in teacher education university courses in the spring of 2015. For the cross-cultural communication, we used a cross-platform online discussion application called *Schoolology*.

Context

Setting 1: A university in the United Arab Emirates. The study took place in Dubai, which is one of the most densely populated regions in the UAE. The last census found that Emiratis are only 11.38% of the population living in the United Arab Emirates, which makes Emirati citizens a minority in their own nation (UAE National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Although more than 99% of the students attending the university where the study took place are Emirati, they come from a variety of tribal affiliations.

This College of Education offers three practicum experiences in public and private schools, which gradually increase in hours and scope of student involvement throughout the program. All the practicums are paired with coursework in which topics of diversity are integrated, but they are not explicitly taught diversity in an independent course. Finally, the students complete an internship in a government school. Upon graduation with a bachelor's degree in an education concentration, Emirati teachers are offered indefinite teaching contracts at government schools, with a salary of more than AED 14,000 (i.e., approximately the equivalent of \$4,000 USD a month), pension after 25 years of service, as well as housing and child allowance (Ridge, 2008).

Public and private schools in Dubai serve a variety of populations and range in ethnic diversity. Children in the UAE attending government schools are taught with an Arabic curriculum, and English is taught as a foreign language. Some citizens choose to enroll in private education. Private school curriculum models contain a variety of international affiliations, due to the high number of foreigners living in the UAE for work (Kenaid, 2011).

The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) formally known as NCATE, accredited this College of Education in 2013. Most students enroll in the COE coursework after a year and a half of general studies. In 2017, despite offering classes for male and female students, this institution had only one male student to pursue and receive a bachelor's degree in education. Consequently, there is a shortage of male Emirati teachers nationwide (Ridge, 2010).

Setting #2: A university in the USA. The study in the USA was conducted in Southwest Florida. Public schools in Florida serve a diverse population considering students' language, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, 28% of school-aged students spoke a language other than English at home (Ryan, 2013). Florida's English language learners' population has increased gradually between 2003-2004 and 2012-2013, with the cumulative increase of 27.8%. (FLDOE, 2013). In contrast, the majority of Florida's teachers are white, non-Hispanic, and monolingual. As of 2010-2011, Florida's teachers were 72% white, non-Hispanic, 13% Black, and 13% Hispanic (FLDOE, 2010).

The American participants of this study were TCs in a teacher education program, which holds a CAEP accreditation. Students complete five semesters in the teacher education program after the general education classes and other pre-requisites. During the first three semesters of the program, TCs complete the foundation's methods courses in addition to a two-day-per-week teaching internship. Later, in the last two semesters, students complete a full-time student teaching practicum. Typically, most TCs who graduate from the program teach in areas that are geographically closest to the university. These areas represent high cultural and linguistic diversity, e.g., 49% of students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken, (Collier County Public Schools, 2014). To better address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, teachers in Florida are required to have an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Endorsement, which involves coursework in ESOL methods, ESOL curriculum and materials development, cross-cultural communication, applied linguistics, as well as testing and evaluation in ESOL (FLDOE, 2001).

This study took place in two university courses. The instructor for the course in Dubai is an American professor who had worked in UAE for three years before the intervention happened. In the course in the USA, the instructor is a Hungarian-American professor with teaching experience both in Hungary and the USA. The instructors' experience and interest in diversity teacher preparation led them to design the intervention and examine its impact.

Participants

There were 42 participants: 14 TCs in the UAE, and 28 in the USA (see Table 1) in 14 teams; each team had one TC from UAE and 2 TCs from the USA. All these students were enrolled in a university course. In both classrooms, the participation was volunteer-based; the assignment was offered as an alternative to a regular course assignment with no extra credit points. The instructors randomly assigned one Emirati student and two students in the USA to one team to accommodate all interested participants. The

restrictive selection criteria was gender. Only female TCs participated due to the request of the partners in UAE who were culturally restricted from speaking with male students during their bachelor's degree program.

The UAE participants were between 19 and 26 years old. Their specializations included school social work ($n=1$), math education ($n=2$), primary and preparatory English ($n=3$), and early childhood education ($n=8$). The ethnicity of 100% of the participants is Emirati ($n = 14$). All students were in their third semester of teacher education coursework. They were all verified as bilingual speakers because the university requires students to pass language proficiency exams in Arabic and English. In addition, three participants reported they fluently speak a third language; Fārsī, Tagalog, or Urdu. Also, several students understand many words and phrases in additional languages because most families have live-in nannies/maids from other countries, who speak native languages other than English and Arabic (Roumani, 2005).

The participants in the USA ranged in age between 20 and 25 years and represented five majors: elementary education ($n=11$), special education ($n=8$), early childhood education ($n=3$), secondary education ($n=2$), and child and youth studies ($n=4$). During the cross-cultural project, all participants in the USA were either in the first semester ($n=4$) or the second semester ($n=24$) of teacher education program. They indicated their ethnicity as follows: White, non-Hispanic ($n=22$), Hispanic ($n=3$), Haitian ($n=1$), Asian-Pacific ($n= 1$) and others ($n=1$). This distribution reflects national teacher demographics to some extent; specifically, 84% white, non-Hispanic, 7% Black, 6% Hispanic, and 5% other (Feistritzer, 2011). In this project, the USA participants were mainly monolingual English speakers 82% ($n=23$), and 18 % ($n=5$) of the sample were native speakers of Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Thai.

Table 1.

Self-reported Demographic Information from the Participants

	<u>USA</u>	<u>UAE</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>Ethnicity</u>			
White	22	0	79
Hispanic	3	0	11
Hatian	1	0	3
Asian-Pacific	1	0	3
Others	1	14	4
<u>Education Major</u>			
Elementary/Primary	11	3	33
Special	8	0	19
Early Childhood	3	8	26
Secondary	2	0	5
Child and Youth Studies	4	0	10
Math Education	0	2	5
School Social Work	0	1	2
<u>Language/s</u>			
Monolingual English	23	0	55
Bilingual	5	11	38
Trilingual	0	3	7
Totals (N = 42)	28	14	

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected in a five-week-long course assignment during March and April of 2015. The two-course instructors designed this cross-cultural assignment with the purpose of expanding the TCs' cultural insights. As an intervention to support TCs' ability to gain new perspectives,

the participants focused on culture and educational issues through virtual asynchronous discussions with their online e-pal from another country.

The professor in UAE created a course on Schoology, which served as a communication platform for the TCs. They received guidelines with a schedule of the five-week intervention to follow. Every week each team member was expected to complete a post that had two parts: (1) a non-structured conversation about teaching, culture, and issues in which TCs were interested, and (2) a reflection on an educational scenario with guiding questions. TCs also posted photos of their country and city. According to the guidelines, as a sign of respect to Muslim TCs, no photos of people and family members were allowed to be posted.

The data-set for this study included the TCs' five-week long communication posts, and a pre- and post-survey. Before the project started, the instructors developed a survey that was used as a pre-assessment on participants' knowledge and expectations and as a post-assessment after the fifth week. The purpose of the survey was to initiate TCs' self-reflection on their knowledge about their own culture and the partner's culture and to generate their thinking about the learning outcomes and the challenges. The survey had nine questions with a Likert scale of 1-5, two questions for word association regarding their own culture and the partner culture, and seven open-ended questions. The Emirati TCs completed the survey on a paper handout; while the TCs in the USA completed the survey on Canvas, the system used for course delivery in the university.

In summary, the dataset was composed of (1) the pre- and post-survey, and (2) a total of 433 posts from the 42 participating students during five weeks. The number of posts surpassed the expected 210 posts, which would have included one weekly post from each student for five weeks. The high number of posts might indicate the TCs' genuine interest in communicating with their partner beyond the expectations of the project. For data analysis, the participants were coded with an indication of the country/nationality and a number. Thus, "US-1" stands for the first student in the USA, and "EM-1" stands for the first Emirati student in the UAE.

Research questions

1. To what extent did TCs' self-reported knowledge about their own culture and their partner's culture differ at the beginning and the end of the cross-cultural communication?
2. What newly gained understanding and perspectives related to culture did TCs identify as an outcome of this project?

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question related to the change in TCs self-reported knowledge about (a) their own culture and (b) those of their partner's culture, we used participants' responses to the eight Likert scale questions on the pre- and post-survey. The means and standard deviation were calculated. Then, a paired t-test was conducted to gain a statistical analysis of the difference between the pre- and post-assessment results for each outcome variable (i.e., to see which changes were statistically significant). The presence or absence of statistically significant mean differences allowed for an interpretation of whether the teacher's perceptions had changed over time. The p-score values were calculated as a two-tailed test with an alpha level set at .05.

In addition, we analyzed the participants' free word association responses to pre and post open-ended survey questions. The questions requested participants to propose ten words to describe their perception of UAE culture and the culture of USA. Although many research methods exist for examining free associations of words in mental health research as well as psycholinguistic research, the methodological recommendations on these strategies do not determine that one method is better than another (Nelson, McEvoy, & Schreiber, 2004). Therefore, global results provide meaningful insights for the consideration of each normed representation of the UAE culture and USA culture.

In regards to the second research question, we analysed the free associations, the post-reflections, informal conversations, and case studies guided by the 'data analysis spiral' as described by Creswell (1998, 2013). The model requires the following sequence of steps: (1) data management; (2) initial reading and memoing; (3) coding, describing, and interpreting data; (4) data presentation and interpretation (Creswell 2013, p.142). The patterns that were found in TCs' keywords about culture provided the criteria for coded themes for this question.

Findings

This research study aimed to explore the demonstration of the cultural views and awareness of TCs in the United Arab Emirates and the USA. Overall, the five-week-long cross-national on-line communication allowed TCs to express their thoughts, consider their partners' responses, and reconsider their perceptions about their culture and their partner's culture.

Perception of Culture

The first research question addressed the extent TCs' self-reported knowledge about (a) their culture and (b) their partner's culture differ from the starting and the closing point of the project. To answer the question, we used two sets of data: a survey with self-reported knowledge on the surface and deep level of culture and the participants' word association to the culture.

Participants' perceptions about their culture: The participants' self-reported perception of their knowledge of the surface and deep level of their culture indicated no statistically significant change during the five weeks of the project. Specifically, as Table 2 shows for TCs in the USA, the mean of their perceived knowledge about their culture ranged 3.6-3.96 on the four pre-survey indicators. Although there is a slight increase in their perceived knowledge related to their culture with a range of 3.96-4.29 on the post-survey, this change is not significant. Before the project, the TCs in the United Arab Emirates scored their knowledge on their culture with a mean ranging between 4.29-4.64 on the four indicators. Similar to the TCs in the USA, on the post-survey, there is a slight increase in Emirati students' knowledge related to their culture with a range of 4.57-4.71; however, this change is also not significant.

The USA participants perceived their knowledge of surface elements of culture slightly stronger than before in comparison to that of the deep level of their culture. The participants in the UAE tended to score themselves higher on their awareness in surface elements than on the deep level of their culture before the project began. This difference leveled out slightly in the post-data.

Overall, we can see slightly higher scores from participants from the UAE, which might indicate their somewhat better knowledge of their culture or a slightly more optimistic evaluation of their knowledge. These results suggest that the cross-national project did not significantly change the participants' perception of their knowledge regarding surface and deep level of their own culture. Yet, the findings indicate consistent slight increases in knowledge. This might be the result of the participants' engagement in conversation about their country and community.

Table 2.
TCs' Self-Reported Perceived Knowledge of Their Own Culture on Average (n =42)

Variable (self-perception of cultural knowledge)	Pre-survey Mean (SD)		Post- survey Mean (SD)	
	<u>Group USA</u>	<u>Group UAE</u>	<u>Group USA</u>	<u>Group UAE</u>
country's surface culture	3.96 (0.89)	4.64 (0.50)	4.29 (0.81)	4.71 (0.47)
country's deep culture	3.8 (0.91)	4.36 (0.50)	4.00 (0.87)	4.71 (0.47)
communities' surface culture	3.72 (0.74)	4.64 (0.63)	4.28 (0.74)	4.71 (0.47)
communities' deep culture	3.6 (0.87)	4.29 (0.61)	3.96 (0.98)	4.57 (0.51)

Table 3.

The Mean Difference in TCs' Perceptions of their Own Culture, According to Paired T-tests of the Variable (n =42)

Variable (self-perception of cultural knowledge)	USA Pre-Post Difference Sig. (2-tailed)	UAE Pre-Post Difference Sig. (2-tailed)
country's surface culture	0.33	0.07
country's deep culture	0.20	0.35
city/communities' surface culture	0.56	0.07
city/communities' deep culture	0.36	0.28

*p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001

To further understand the possible changes in TCs perception of their culture and their partners' culture, an analysis of the keywords for describing the two cultures was completed. The analysis of the American TCs' keywords about their culture in the USA indicated an overwhelming presence of repeat words describing the culture both before and after the project. Except for few nouns, such as "McDonald's," "apple pie," "Hollywood," and "barbeque," TCs more often used adjectives and descriptors to express the shared values of the society, such as "democratic, modern, free, innovative, proud, patriotic, strong, determined, or hardworking."

There were also many references to diversity as an asset in the USA, such as: "religiously diverse, melting pot, culturally diverse." Although, most keywords were positive, in some TCs' responses their emerged self-criticism toward the society using the keywords such as "greedy, egocentric, overweight, instant gratification, opinionated, military, judgmental, and materialistic." Overall, in their reflection about their culture the positive shared values dominate their perception.

Words frequently used by Emirati TCs to describe their culture included references to political and religious dress, such as "kandora" (i.e. white attire worn by men), "abayaa" (i.e. loose-fitting black dress worn by women), and "burqa" (i.e. traditional modest eye covering commonly worn by elderly Emirati women). Also, famous revered political rulers, such as "Sheikh Mohammed" and "Sheikh Zayed" were mentioned several times. In addition, collective values such as; "hierarchy, conservative, Islam, Muslim, mosques, united, hospitality, collectivism, peaceful, community, rulers, international, and respect" were reported.

Some UAE participants mentioned strong adjectives referring to their perceptions of their culture such as "great, inspiring, amazing, #1." Yet, no negative keywords were mentioned. Direct references to growth as well as contradictory words indicate the rapid changes that are taking place in the nation like "growth, young, old, new, traditional, modern." Furthermore, new buildings such as "Burj Khalifa, Dubai Mall, Burj al Arab", and heritage forms of building and locations were mentioned such as; "Al Hosen palace, tents, souqs, and forts." Items in a common, traditional family diet were noted; "karak, fish, regag, Arabic coffee." Also, common words associated with the UAE economy appeared such as "gold, rich, oil, pearls, tourism." Most strong adjectives disappeared in the post-survey except for the positive adjective "interesting". Overall, there was little change between the pre & post survey data.

Interestingly, the word association analysis indicates that TCs in both countries more often focus on important shared values of their culture. The emic perspective would suggest that these items are prolific in the culture. Moreover, each still maintain historical, widespread meaning.

Participants' Perception of the Partners' Culture: The participants' self-reported perception on their knowledge about their partners' culture indicated no significant change for TCs in the USA during the five weeks of the project. In particular, as Table 4 shows on the pre-survey, the TCs in the USA evaluated their knowledge about the culture of UAE on a range of 1.84-2.0. Again, their knowledge on surface elements of culture is slightly higher than the deep elements of culture. Although, the post-survey shows a slight increase of their knowledge ranging between 2.72 and 3.08, this change is not statistically significant.

On the other hand, there is a statistically significant change for participants in the UAE in their perception of their knowledge about the surface and deep level of the USA culture. As Table 5 indicates on the pre-survey, the mean of their perceived knowledge ranged between 1.5-2.57; however, on the post-survey, the scores increased and ranged between 2.86 and 3.79. Moreover, from the pre- to the post-survey, there

was a statistically significant difference in the UAE participants' scores which represent their self-reported knowledge of their partner's USA city/community surface culture; $t(13)=-7.870, p=.000$, and deep culture $t(13)=-6.817, p=.000$. In addition, there was a statistically significant difference in the UAE participants' perceptions of their overall knowledge of USA surface culture and deep culture; $t(13)=-3.606, p=.003$. These results indicate that TCs in the UAE felt that their knowledge both about the surface and the deep level of their partners' country and the community had significantly improved by the end of the project.

Table 4.

TCs' Self-Reported Perceived Knowledge of Their Partners' Culture on Average (n = 42)

Variable (self-perception of cultural knowledge)	Pre-survey Mean (SD)		Post-survey Mean (SD)	
	Group USA	Group UAE	Group USA	Group UAE
country's surface culture	2.00 (1.04)	2.57 (0.76)	3.08 (0.57)	3.57 (0.65)
country's deep culture	1.84 (1.03)	2.07 (0.73)	2.92 (0.55)	3.07 (0.58)
city/ communities' surface culture	2.00 (1.19)	1.86 (0.66)	2.84 (0.68)	3.79 (0.66)
city/ communities' deep culture	1.84 (1.14)	1.50 (0.52)	2.72 (0.68)	2.86 (0.66)

Table 5.

The Mean Difference in TCs' Perceptions of their Partners' Culture, According to Paired T-tests of the Variable (n = 42)

Variable (self-perception of cultural knowledge)	USA Pre-Post Difference Sig. (2-tailed)	UAE Pre-Post Difference Sig. (2-tailed)
partner country's surface culture	1.08	1.0**
partner country's deep culture	1.08	1.0**
partner city/communities' surface culture	0.84	1.93***
partner city/communities' deep culture	0.88	1.36***

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

The analysis of the word association about the partners' culture indicated a shift in the American TCs' perception of the UAE culture by the end the project. Specifically, before the project, TCs in the USA described the culture of UAE prodominantly with words related to geography, climate, architecture, food, religion, ethnicity and clothing, such as "Persian Gulf, tourism destination, modern metropolitan, desert, oil, skyscrapers, warm weather, lamb, beef, spicy food, Muslim, Arab people, head dresses." These descriptive words focused solely on the visible and tangible layer of the culture. In addition to these descriptors of physical reality, TCs also used adjectives to describe a deeper level of the culture. For example, "conservative, respectful, hardworking, strict, religious, humble, modest." A few other expressions, such as "arranged marriage, deep roots, deep beliefs, loyalty, strong family ties, and gender segregation" also added descriptive elements. Judgmental descriptors and concepts also surfaced, e.g., "unfair, male dominating, dangerous, sexist, and exotic." Overall, before the projects, the American TCs highlighted buildings, food, and weather with some words that directly indicate the deep values of the culture. However, many polarized, judgemental descriptions were also utilized.

After the completion of the project, the American TCs described the culture of UAE prodominantly with adjectives related to the deep culture, and the reference to the surface culture such as geography disappeared. Only a few words referred to the surface culture, such as "Abaya clothing", "camel racing", and "falconry". However, even these words, related to the visible layer of the culture, actually gave reference to deeply revered, value-laden traditions. The newly emerging concepts referring to the deep level of the

culture, such as “education valued, caring, open, teaching is a calling, conservative yet innovative, accepting, enlightening, encouraging, sophisticated, loving, English proficient, well-mannered, educated, motivated”, were probably acquired from the conversations with their partners. The American TCs’ descriptors became more unique and appreciative. Two students used the adjectives related to culture/people in UAE “underestimated and misjudged.” These words may have appeared because the TCs themselves felt they had misjudged and underestimated people from the other culture. The shift toward the deep level of the culture and a more in-depth understanding of another culture was well demonstrated by the complete lack negative or diminishing adjectives or concepts.

Commonalities among words of Emirati participants in the pre- and post-survey highlighted their perspective of the USA as a culture of entertainment, education, freedom, and geographic diversity. Words used to describe the USA included “Hollywood, New York, 50 states, burgers, fast food, shopping, books, brands, tv shows, music, entertainment, English, Obama, freedom, diverse, creative, modern, crowded, university, seasonal weather, Harvard, highly educated, university systems.” Also, many of the Emirati TCs viewed USA culture through a lens which highlighted the differences and exotic features in comparison to the Emirati culture. The examples include, ‘green trees’ in the USA as opposed to the common desert landscape in the UAE, and ‘blonde hair’ as opposed to dark hair. Lastly, according to an emic analysis of this data, many of the UAE participants also initially described the USA culture in terms of negative “otherness.” Words such as “pigs, bad-food, crime, drugs, and dogs” were also mentioned, and these are all things that are widely considered as either somewhat inappropriate, or religiously unacceptable in the UAE. In the post-survey data set, on the other hand, all word associations referring to culturally unacceptable or undesirable things such a “pigs, bad-food, crime, drugs, and dogs” disappeared.

In summary, the American TCs’ self-reported survey only suggested a slight shift, and did not show a statistically significant change in their perception of their knowledge about culture in the UAE. Yet, the in-depth examination of keywords about their partners’ culture suggests the shift is toward a multilayered understanding of culture with less focus on tangible features of the culture and is, indeed, meaningful. The word association analysis indicated that American students became more aware and appreciative of the deeply held values of the people in the UAE. In addition, Emirati TCs self-reported statistically significant changes in their knowledge of their partners’ surface and deep culture was validated with their word associations. Perhaps the extensive communication between partners allowed them to see their partner as an individual of a given culture, and this direct interaction made TCs reconsider their initial perceptions.

Newly gained perspectives about culture: TCs’ reflection

The second research questions targeted the TCs’ perception of their learning and newly gained perspectives about culture, as an outcome of this cross-cultural professional dialogue. The review of TCs’ posts, reflections, and post-survey data indicated new perspectives about their partners’ culture as gains and outcomes in this project. The topics that surfaced are the following: (1) emergence of a new understanding of partner’s culture, (2) a shift in perspectives on cultural diversity, and (3) recognition of the value of cross-cultural professional collaboration.

Emergence of new understanding of partner’s culture

Teacher candidates in both countries felt they gained new understanding about their partners’ culture, which allowed for broadening their knowledge and reconsidering some misconceptions. Several TCs in the USA recognized that education is important in the UAE. In the posts, the partners described and discussed both education systems, daily routines in schools, content, and pedagogy in classrooms. These rich conversations resulted in the following statement, “I learned a lot about education and the value placed on education in the UAE” (US-5). TCs in the UAE also commented on their enhanced knowledge about the education in the USA. Most seemed to expect that the education in the USA was very different from the one in the UAE. However, many Emirati TCs mentioned a newfound insights about cultural comparisons, e.g., “My picture about their culture in my mind was very different and now when I talked to them everything changes. I thought their education is different, but it seems it’s similar” (EM-3).

In addition, TCs in the USA seemed to recognize how traditions serve as essential driving forces in both personal and professional contexts in the UAE. However, they also noticed that deeply rooted traditions allow people in the UAE to live a modern life while maintaining their heritage. One stated, “I learned that their culture has strong traditional roots and rituals, but the people seem to be up to date with the modern world” (US-7). This newly gained understanding is important because only a few weeks earlier, many of these TCs still focused on tangible characteristics of the culture and even had negative attributes in their

descriptions, such as “unfair,” and “dangerous”, about the culture in Dubai. A similar emergence of understanding surfaced among TCs in the UAE when one noted: “Communication with my partner helps me understand their lifestyle” (EM-12). Overall, for TCs in both countries, these cross-cultural dialogues seemed to generate knowledge and appreciation toward distant cultures and people.

Shift in perspectives on cultural differences

Teacher candidates in both countries demonstrated a clear awareness of the shift in their perspectives related to cultural differences. Specifically, many commented on the recognition of similarities between herself and her partner, regardless of their different cultural backgrounds. Some comments addressed these similarities at a more personal than professional level. For example, one stated, “I learned that there is someone else in a different country who is just as passionate about teaching as I am. I also learned that although we are from different countries with different cultures, our needs, wants, and desires are the same” (US-18). In addition, many TCs referred to the conversations about the educational scenarios on which they critically reflected and proposed solutions. These conversations made them aware of shared values they hold about quality education.

My partner and I, though from different backgrounds, agreed on a lot of the same issues for our case studies. I found it interesting that even though our countries are different and our students are raised with different backgrounds, the discipline and thinking process of the teachers tend to be similar (US-14).

On the other hand, several TCs in the UAE acknowledged the cultural differences as important factors to consider in a scenario analysis. One said, “I found basic differences in the way we tackled the case studies. We wear different lenses” (EM-2). Overall, these students emphasized the importance of considering the cultural context in which the scenario takes place; and even the cultural lenses through which the analyst interprets the scenario. However, TCs also recognized the benefit of gaining understanding and new perspectives from a colleague representing another culture. As one noted, “My partner shared a lot of ideas and strategies that really benefit me. I like reading about their thoughts, which made me realize things I didn’t think about before” (EM-5).

A perceived shift can be observed in the self-reflection on their views, biases, and misconceptions. Specifically, some TCs in the USA acknowledged their ignorance and unfounded assumptions which affected their views before this cross-cultural dialogue. The following quotes from two TCs in the USA indicate how the conscientious reflections on beliefs and views have shifted their perspectives. One said, “I learned that even if we view or perceive someone’s culture as totally subservient, submissive, and extremely different from ours, we should always consider the perspective of people who practice that culture, as we may be surprised to see that assumptions were harsh and/or wrong” (US-9). Another TC also noted, “After reviewing my previous answers, I realized how ignorant I was about the culture” (US-20). For TCs in the UAE, this shift appears to be less radical; they mainly commented on the development of acceptance. For instance, “I learned the importance of accepting others and that acceptance does not mean agreement. There should be acceptance in order to deal with people from different backgrounds and with different needs” (EM-2). Overall, all participants experienced some shift in their thinking and perspectives about cultural differences, which they perceived as a value in the process of becoming a teacher.

Recognition of the value of cross-cultural professional collaboration

Teacher candidates found the cross-cultural dialogue beneficial and invaluable for their future professional career. Both groups of TCs expressed that they feel “confident”, “strong”, and “helpful,” because of being engaged in this professional dialogue. They seemed to value the collegial collaboration. Especially with colleagues from a distant country. “The discussion of case studies makes me close to this teacher to exchange experiences, strategies, techniques, and skills which will help me in my life” (EM-12). This recognition of value in cross-cultural communication might generate their future outreach to colleagues to work on joint solutions and to gain professional insights. One student expressed her interest in continued dialogue, “I want to do this again because it encourages us to share ideas and communicate with colleagues” (EM-9). At the end of the assignment, many students were suggesting pathways for keeping in contact (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat). Overall, these views and interest regarding the cross-cultural professional collaboration were supported with their consistent participation in the five-week-long project and with the depth and breadth of their conversation.

Discussion

Although many interventions for diversity teacher preparation have been suggested in research (Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2009; Ruan & Beach, 2005; Nancy & Zeni, 2004; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008; Christian & Zippay, 2012; Paulus & Roberts, 2006; Lacina & Sowa, 2005; Miller & Fuller, 2006; Monroe & Ruan, 2018; Acquah & Commins, 2017; Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Petersen, & Welsh, 2013; Miretzky, 2017; Park & Essary, 2011; Zamboanga, Ham, Tomaso, Audley, & Pole, 2016), none of these research studies involve TCs from different nations responding to diverse case studies of teaching and learning in a predominately asynchronous online format. This study aimed to examine the changes in perspectives of TCs in different countries as a result of their participation in a cross-cultural intervention. We examined (a) self-reported change in cultural understanding and (b) newly gained understanding and perspectives about culture. Findings of this research indicate that this intervention was able to help; 1) encourage TCs' positive image of their culture while humbling positive notions of national pride, 2) reduce TCs' use of stereotypes about another culture, 3) support TCs' awareness of cultural similarities and differences, and provide participants with personal satisfaction and professional confidence.

There were no statistically significant changes in TCs perceptions of their own culture according to the self-reported survey data. Yet, the word association analysis indicated an overall positive image of self-culture. This was maintained throughout the study.

Although participants did not tend to self-report gains in the surface or deep cultural knowledge of their own culture, some did utilize less ethnocentric descriptions of their culture in the post data (i.e., demonstrating less ethnocentrism). Amongst the UAE participants, some of the words used in the pre-survey were exaggerated adjectives suggesting that their country is better than others (e.g., UAE, #1). These adjectives were no longer evident in the word analysis post data. According to a recent investigation, ethnocentrism is negatively associated with cultural intelligence (CQ) (Young, Haffejee, & Corsun, 2017). Therefore, participant elimination of ethnocentric description might be considered a positive indicator of developing cultural intelligence.

Before the intervention, some TCs shared stereotypes about the partner's culture (e.g. "dangerous" in the word association data). Also, features not generalizable to their partner's culture, or of value in their own culture (e.g., blonde-hair, pork, etc.) were mentioned to describe the other culture. After the completion of the project, TCs stereotypes disappeared in the dataset. In fact, words such as "underestimated" and "misjudged" appeared. The intervention may have contributed to helping the TCs avoid identifying the other culture with elements that are unusual to their own culture. We argue that diversity may be more philosophically taxing to understand as a member of a developed country. Such civilizations are enindated with modernity and, perhaps, lack the hidden luxury of continuous exposure to the rare funds of knowledge from the historical foundations of the cultures in which they identify with. In doing so, trendy companys and locations (e.g. McDonald, Hollywood, Dubai Mall), may replace the historical landmarks of the civilization in these cultural descriptions. Moreover, citizens may take for granted the complexity of their own culture (Garcia, 2002; Palaiologou & Gialamas, 2015), and therefore may normalize ways of learning and teaching (Buchanan, 2017). Such mindsets which adhere to new branding trends might address different ways of living as appearing crude, exotic, or extreme (Miner, 1956). While it is impossible to claim these stereotypes no longer exist, we seem to have found empirical evidence that the stereotypes were replaced with meaningful reflections on their partner's culture in the word association data. Based on their self-reflection on their newly gained understanding of culture, students in both countries acknowledged their improved understanding of the education system and traditions.

TCs' comments emphasize that the intervention supported their professional confidence as teachers. They directly expressed their interest in problem solving educational case studies with peers from another country. For example, one Emirati student emphasized her new understanding of the value of cultural context in analyzing educational case studies when she wrote, "I realize things I did not think about before." In addition, post reflections exuded professional confidence from both sets of participants at the end of the study.

This experience is unlike other avenues for gaining professional confidence during intercultural communication. For example, international conferences are typically opportunities for individuals to associate with each other in person and on a professional level. Such events are often formal in nature where participants tend to have conversations in person. Whereas, this intervention allowed participants an opportunity to interact asynchronously and did not require any formal attire. In fact, the inability to observe each other removes the potential for creating stereotypes based on appearance. E-pal friendships were developed based on words rather than appearance.

No acculturation demands were identified from any participants or instructors within this online intervention. Perhaps this is because all participants were at the same level of professional authority, both

professors were involved in facilitating the intervention, and the participants were residing within the cultural context of their current university. The permissive nature of this experience, as well as the opportunity for the TCs to remain in their own nation during participation in this intracultural intervention allowed, perhaps, more of an educational ambassador experience as a professional than some other modern attempts at providing the advancement in intercultural education endeavors. For instance, in contrast to this intervention, some recent approaches in supporting teachers to develop intercultural sensitivity tout that deploying formal lecture-based training experiences provides a space for learning about intercultural interaction. However, when listening to lectures, the aim to develop intercultural communication skills may remain unaffected. For example, an authoritarian approach in which attending an international institute (which is always held in D.C., USA) affords supposed gains for an attendee by awarding them with a ‘Certificate in International Education Diplomacy’ (Whitehead, 2011). Furthermore, in a case where the social capital of the individual participant, allows for the freedom to travel, going to another country to attend a ‘training’ may have a moderating effect by the nature of being a guest in a foreign culture which espouses authority on an international topic. Thus, participants in pre-scripted cultural ‘trainings’ may be encouraged to acculturate in hidden (e.g. presenting literature exclusively from developed countries) and/or overt (e.g. instructing a Muslim conference participant to pray in the bathroom) ways due to a lack of shared association. Our findings suggest that interventions to develop intracultural sensitivity provide formats where all participants can be a part of a mutually beneficial learning process. For example, this might include organizational structures where all member contributors are equal stakeholders (e.g. international grass-roots associations, e-pals, pen-pals, etc.).

Most participants acknowledged their emerging friendship between partners. They credited the friendship for helping them recognize ignorance and misconception. This aligns with research findings which explore the transfer of social capital in multinational corporations which suggests that trust, commitment, and identification as a unified group are determining factors (Andrews, 2017; Kostova & Roth, 2002). Factors which sound a lot like friendship qualities. This was especially the case for TCs in the USA as they developed an understanding of the Muslim faith; and for students in the UAE as they developed an understanding of the conservative aspects of American culture.

Implications

The results of this study contain implications for teacher education and research worldwide. This intervention has potential to become an ongoing principal component in teacher training programs. Diversity teacher preparation interventions are imperative due to the emerging overt racism and hatred against targeted cultural groups worldwide. This current study could serve as an example for bridging cultures, which is especially important between students in Muslim countries and students in countries in increasing Islamophobia. In addition, the use of word association data may provide insights for the development of future multicultural education interventions regardless of country origins.

Recent research on increasing preservice teachers’ intercultural sensitivity (Monroe & Ruan, 2018) claims that “one assignment is not enough to move students’ responses through the developmental continuum (p. 12).” Though it was theoretically outside of the scope of this study to investigate the students’ responses on a developmental trajectory, we do agree with the recommendations from Monroe and Ruan (2018) which suggest that “an integrated, ongoing approach that begins in the early stages of a teacher preparation program, that is woven throughout several courses and field experiences, and continues through the student internship, is more likely to make a stronger impact on the intercultural sensitivity of preservice teachers (p.12).” This intervention has the potential to be utilized by individuals from many nations and in a variety of university courses. Courses may design case studies to meet the learning objectives of their course, and, perhaps, students may share problems encountered in their field experiences. This will continuously allow individuals from different countries to discuss their professional assignments e.g., case studies, field experiences, etc., and to gain a more global perspective on the selected topic.

This study indicates that a qualitative approach, e.g., word association analysis and theme-data spiral analysis have the potential to explore insights related to culture that a quantitative self-reported survey somewhat failed to indicate. Therefore, mixed-methods for a confirmatory purpose, and at least a qualitative dataset and analysis are recommended for making an in-depth examination of people’s perception of deeply held values of the culture.

We found the word association analysis was particularly a mixed-methods technique because it provides a highly convergent dataset to address the research question. Moreover, although the question is open-ended (i.e., qualitative), participants are limited to the number and detail provided in their responses

(i.e., quantitative). Ever since the early use of this technique, it is well understood that a population with sufficient intracultural similarity can produce both common terms as well as terms for further consideration in the analysis (Bernard, 1994). The word association exercise, which is similar to the 'free list' data collection technique, originally developed by anthropologists, limits the list to only the first ten words, because our research question emphasizes what terms they consider to be important at each particular time, rather than how much they might know (Fleisher & Harrington, 1998). This methodology may be particularly insightful for educational researchers to consider. Whereas, preexisting word knowledge is utilized in a variety of cognitive tasks (Nelson et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Limitations of this investigation exist, mainly because of the reliance on self-analysis and self-reported data. However, analyzing their case study responses for accuracy was outside of the scope of this study. Specifically, we argue that researchers should ask teachers if they believe they are gaining valuable lessons in their intercultural experiences since they are active sociocultural agents in constructing their own knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Although this research suggests that the intervention has a widespread positive benefit on TCs' views about culture in another nation, future research should conduct the intervention over an entire program and determine if those gains are maintained over time.

Despite the limitation of the short duration of this intervention, findings suggest that the intervention was both personally and professionally rewarding for the participants. In addition, it improved the nature of cultural associations by eliminating the use of stereotypes without instruction to do so, and encouraged the meaningful identification of cultural norms to improve cultural understanding. Finally, we found the experience humbled our participants' competitive superlatives pertaining to national pride. Thus, for a variety of reasons, such an intervention might be advisable for stakeholders in higher education and children in a global curriculum as well.

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