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Internationalisation in teacher education: student teachers’ reflections on experiences from a field study in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Internationalisation of higher education and teacher education has been a key issue since the 1990s and many universities still attempt to increase student mobility ever since. Much research has been done on the topic of internationalisation and higher education, including teacher education trying to show how a certain programme impacts on students’ learning, especially intercultural learning when it comes to programmes in teacher education. These studies are often directed towards programmes that last several months or a whole year. The focus of this study is rather to explore if and in what way experiences in a two-week field study can contribute to a student teacher’s intercultural learning and professional development. The findings of the research show that even a short field study has an important impact on the individual student teacher’s understanding of themselves and on awareness of teachers’ living and working conditions in a different culture like South Africa.

KEYWORDS

student teachers; field study; internationalisation; qualitative research; intercultural competence; professional development; South Africa; Sweden

1. Introduction

Internationalisation is currently high on the agenda in universities and in discussions on teacher education as the importance of teacher professionalisation and teacher competencies has increased in the past years (Acedo, 2012, pp. 1–3; Aydarova & Marquardt, 2016; Quezada, 2010, 2012; Romano, 2002; Schmidinger, 1996; Sieber & Mantel, 2012; Winslade, 2016; Wiseman & Anderson, 2014). In the literature this is usually assigned to globalisation (Stier, 2004, p. 339) and to the awareness that high...
quality teachers are among the most important factors for achieving high-quality education (Hattie, 2009, p. 126; International Programme Office Report Series No. 36; Santiago, 2002). Internationalisation is most often viewed as a positive factor, not the least by policy makers (Leask, 2010, p. 3), but also students and educators consider it important in order to prepare for participation in a globalised and multicultural society (Slethaug, 2007, p. 5). There is hope that students will come to understand the world through internationalising practices, create openness to and respect for cultural differences and further the ability to work effectively across cultures (Leask, 2010, pp. 6–8). But this may be wishful thinking. What do we really know about students’ openness and respect for cultural differences after taking part in “internationalisation”? As argued by Svensson and Wihlborg, there is a lack of understanding of internationalisation from a pedagogical perspective, as well as from a perspective of the participants involved (Svensson & Wihlborg, 2010, p. 598). Both these perspectives are important and part of our research agenda for the work analysed for this article.

1.1. Aims of the study

This paper draws on research on Swedish student teachers doing a two-week international field study with the aim of studying schools and education in South Africa. We specifically want to address these questions: What experiences do the student teachers articulate in reflections about the study visit to South Africa? And can a study visit programme for two weeks in any sense claim to enhance learning for the student teachers’ professional development? With our findings we hope to contribute to knowledge of student teachers’ professional development when taking part in internationalisation, as well as to the methodology discussion on listening to the participants, i.e. the student teachers’ own reflections from taking part in internationalisation (cf. Jones, 2010, p. xv).

2. Internationalisation in teacher education: research, concepts and limitations

There is clear evidence that more and more students wish to have a greater sense of global connectedness and an understanding of living in an increasingly globalised world, and that students feel the need to be informed and able to critically reflect on current world issues (Bourn, 2010, p. 27). Also, the discourse on the role of the professional educator is partly changing, and at the European level there is significant pressure on identifying quality factors and vital competences for the future teachers of Europe (Chapman & Aspin, 2013, pp. 49–51; Santiago, 2002). It is often emphasised that especially teachers need face-to-face experiential learning with people different from themselves if they are to develop cross-cultural skills, knowledge, and competence (Chavez Chavez & O’Donnell, 1998). However, there are difficulties in implementing sustainable processes of internationalisation in teacher education and training since programmes often fail to take into account the diversity of local policy and teaching contexts (Acedo, 2012, p. 2; Aydarova & Marquardt, 2016; Wihlborg, 2009, p. 117).
The concept of internationalisation is not a clear and well-defined one; rather, it has various interpretations in policies and activities and is highly context-specific (Acedo, 2012, p. 2). As pointed out by Dunne (2011, pp. 609–610) the whole area lacks clarity regarding terms. In our work we employ a definition of internationalisation from Knight (2004, p. 11; cf. Knight, 2003, p. 2) where internationalisation is understood as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. We choose this definition as our research connects to the educational arena and also includes the word intercultural, which is often used in educational discourses in Sweden. As for the concept of intercultural competence, we apply a definition from Bennett (2009, S3) “acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one’s own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange”. But here we also argue for adding a dimension of the ability to think critically and reflectively about knowledge construction and knowledge use, thus paying attention to asymmetrical power relations and power distribution, since this always is an issue in intercultural work as well as in education.

2.1. Internationalisation in a Swedish university context

During the last decades, teacher education in Sweden has undergone many different and sometimes contradictory reforms, as in many other countries (Furlong, Cochran-Smith, & Brennan, 2009). The last reform took place in 2011 and was entitled “Top of the Class- new teacher education programmes” (Government Bill 2009/10:89) underlining yet again that teacher education needs to become more internationalised (Government Bill, 2009/10:89, p. 39). Teacher education programmes stand out negatively from other university education programmes in terms of internationalisation and student teachers in Sweden have long been the student group least likely to move parts of their education abroad (Universitet och högskolor, årsrapport 2016/ Universities and University Colleges, Annual Report 2016). Consequently, in the document for the latest teacher education reform, a need is stressed to see an increase in both student teacher and teacher mobility in the context of teacher training (Government Bill 2009/10:89, pp. 39–41; cf. International Programme Office Report Series No. 36).

2.1.1. Rhetoric of internationalisation in the local context

On the local university level in which the student teachers and lecturers in this research studied and worked, a policy document on the overall university level starts by declaring that:

International exchange is important to give students and teachers access to international academic environments, as well as to be competitive in an increasingly globalised educational market. (University policy 2005, preface)

As we can see, the text not only underlines access to international academic environments, but also states quite straightforward a goal about being compatible in an educational market, which probably echoes documents from the European Commission (see, for example, The Bologna Declaration of 1999).
Policies for teacher education at the local university mirror the above-mentioned overarching university policy, but points specifically to teacher education stating that:

...internationalisation [has to be] included in all aspects of teacher education—from course content to students’ personal experiences. The students face in their future professional environment pupils who have met the impact of globalisation both in positive and negative ways. They must therefore be prepared to take a stand on sometimes contradictory pedagogical and moral issues. (Policy teacher education 2005, our own translation)

As can be seen, relevant local policies underline strategic work on internationalisation to take place in “all aspects of teacher education”. The argument for this is in the policy document underpinned by vaguely referring to globalisation and its consequences for education such as “be prepared to take a stand on sometimes contradictory pedagogical and moral issues” which is difficult to understand the exact meaning of. As pointed out in much work on internationalisation and intercultural work (cf. Dunne, 2011; Wihlborg, 2009), there is a lack of concretisation, and it remains unclear what these terms really mean pedagogically. The above policies, we argue, are part of such rather unclear and mystifying discourses on the importance of internationalisation.

2.1.2. Study course for this research
The student teachers in this research took part in a general course in teacher education where all students aiming at becoming teachers have to study in their second last term of their education\(^2\), regardless of specialisation on subjects or age of their prospective pupils. The course has internationalisation as a specific theme, and consequently, the field studies are not only add-ons to the course content (cf. Edwards et al. (2003, p. 186). The aim is to integrate an “international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. It is emphasised that by working with the theme on internationalisation, the student teachers can gain new perspective on learning and what it means to work as a teacher in countries other than Sweden (Local policy, teacher education 2005).

3. Methods for this research
The current study builds on a qualitative research using both a design of written letters, focus groups (Liamputtong, 2011; Morgan, 1998) and individual interviews as instruments to capture and explore how the student teachers experience and make sense of the world. For this article only data from interviews during and after the field study have been used.

The data are produced during two different field studies for student teachers to South Africa in the academic years 2012 and 2014 comprising in total 14 student teachers between the ages of 22 and 28\(^3\). Student teachers were invited by means of an e-mail information letter as well as a special information meeting at the university from the course leaders 6 months before the course introduction. Student teachers interested in taking part in the field study programme had to apply for a scholarship offered and were selected from an individual written assignment and an interview.

The field study programme was designed in cooperation between a South African and a Swedish university. Consequently, both universities were well aware of
expectations, time limits and procedures for the field visits. The programme for the study visits that are in focus here included several school visits to get a general impression of schools in both urban and rural contexts, from Reception year in the preschool up to high school level, small schools that comprised 75–100 students and large schools with over 1000 students, schools in wealthy parts of the city and in the township, and schools for children from different groups of South African society (Black, Coloured, Indian and White).

When in the field, the students were often positioned as the complete observer. On a few occasions they were also positioned as a participant observer (observation with some participation). In the student teachers’ training, several weeks presence in Swedish school environment is included, where the student teachers participate in classrooms and conduct participatory observations as well as training to teach.

All student teachers selected for the field studies were white; nine were females and five were male student teachers. However, the ratio between female and male students is not representative of teacher education programmes in Sweden, as there is usually an even higher proportion of females than males studying to become a teacher (Universitet och högskolor. Årsrapport 2016/ Universities and University Colleges, Annual Report 2016). One of the student teachers had a background other than Swedish, but all were Swedish citizens, as well as English-speaking (as English is taught from at least year four in Swedish schools). Six of the student teachers were studying to become primary school teachers and eight were studying to become secondary or upper secondary school teachers and their subjects of specialisation varied.

In addition to meeting the student teachers during different reflection sessions, the first group of student teachers were interviewed twice and the second group once during their stay in South Africa. The interviews in the field took place during the first week of their field study, while the last interview was done after coming back to Sweden. The interviews in the field were arranged as focus group interviews with four or five students in each group to encourage interaction and discussions (Liamputtong, 2011, pp. 31–32). The focus group interviews were approximately 1.5 h long, while the individual interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes.

Our impression is that the interviews were characterised by mutuality, curiosity about each other’s experiences and respect for different opinions, even though we were positioned in a hierarchical power asymmetry as student teachers and teachers/lecturers. It also came thorough that the student teachers were quite knowledgeable about the general situation in South Africa through their earlier education and Swedish media. Sweden and South Africa has longstanding relations and because of this, South Africa is often mentioned in media.

We both repeatedly listened to the interviews and one of us transcribed the larger part. Together we went through the transcribed material, discussed and compared it in several steps. For our analysis we drew on a constant comparative method, meaning an analysis that was ongoing, open-ended and inductive (Patton, 1990). We identified repeated ideas which we grouped into themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, pp. 31–41), and within them specific data units of both “internal homogeneity” and “external heterogeneity” (Patton, 1990, p. 403). Below, we discuss these patterns constructed as interconnected themes under six subsections.
3.1. Ethics

This study was conducted in compliance with established Swedish ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011, p. 1 [The Swedish Research Council, 2011:1]). Consequently, the student teachers were asked if they would like to participate in the study and they all agreed. They were informed about the ethical guidelines and the right to withdraw from the study at any time, that their details will be kept confidential and the material collected will be used only for research purposes. None of the student teachers withdrew from any of the interviews.

4. Student teachers’ reflections on experiences in the field

Our analysis indicated four themes of reflections by the student teachers which will be discussed under four main headings. We have chosen to use interview extracts from many of the student teachers’ voices to give our findings credibility, but also to be true to their way of expressing their experiences.

4.1. Segregation and democratic change

Within the theme of “Segregation and democratic change” the socially and ethnically divided South African society alongside changes towards a more democratic society were highlighted. As the student teachers visited different areas and different types of schools, this came out very strongly.

Jesper reflects:

Jesper: I’m thinking you’ve already got preconceptions and then they are confirmed right away. I didn’t see any white person walking hand in hand with a black person anywhere along the seafront during these first three days, but white and black people stick to their own. And then it gets even more obvious when you visit schools: around here, pupils and teachers are black.

Int: Did you expect it to be more mixed?

Jesper: No, I really hadn’t … I thought it would be like this, but you still get really affected about the whole thing … when you meet people it kind of grabs your heart … you get really affected by it, the actual situation

The student teachers were very much aware of the history of South Africa and the bygone apartheid system through education and media in Sweden. But, as Jesper says, meeting people and being in the real situation is something else—“It gets right to the heart”. Also, the perspective of democratic change in South Africa was discussed, where the student teachers had quite different understandings of the time needed for such changes to take place. Richard is impressed with the changes in South Africa over the past 20 years:

Richard: Yeah, you definitely notice the segregation right away … On the other hand, I think—here we are, a group of eight white students staying at a hotel run by black people—given that apartheid was abolished only 20 years ago it’s sort of … the tendencies are still there, among both white and black people … at the end of the day, there’s no difference … they do treat
each other with similar levels of respect, so in that way I don’t think you notice the segregation, but when you’re looking … when you’re just observing, you clearly see that’s where the white people go and that’s where the black people go, but then again … in actual conversations or encounters, I don’t think it’s all that obvious.

Richard states that he can’t notice any differences in meetings between people on an individual level; there is mutual respect, but the segregation is clear when observing on a structural level. In his eyes it is “only” 20 years ago changes from the apartheid system began to take place and now, Richard underlines, the student teachers themselves stay in a hostel run by black people. Josephine, on the other hand, challenges the idea about fast changes, expressing disappointment in the political development and makes the following comment:

[...] the differences we came across when visiting schools and that those weren’t that many miles apart but still incredibly segregated, social divides like these … I wasn’t prepared for it … I really thought they would have come further since apartheid …

When discussing an Indian South African university colleague’s argument about how it now is possible for her to move around freely, even walk at the beach, Josephine is upset:

Josephine: Yes, but in my view, given it’s Africa’s most industrially developed country, I don’t think being able to move around freely is that much progress over 20 years—it’s a human right!

The experienced sense of kind of sameness between white and black people is discussed, and Alexander reflects on his experience from a former white C-school\(^6\) that was visited by the group. He says:

Alexander: I kind of feel it’s the other way round, really … in XX (a white upper middle class school) … that I began to feel uncomfortable with all this white restraint … so the person I really connected with was the one who served coffee and tea to the teachers … who … and then … I tried to do that ANC handshake you learn around here with one of the white teachers … and wow, she flinched … you’re not supposed to greet … that’s how you greet black people only … she was really this offended by my greeting … but I used that greeting with this tea server and then it felt like we had some kind of bond and we got talking … she told me about her son who had died and things like that. I don’t know, I get a bit … I find it hard to identify with the white people … because they … I think the whole thing is kind of disgusting, I don’t want to be part of this white society …

Alexander makes quite a strong moral statement in the end, claiming that he doesn’t want to identify with the white people in this society, although himself being white. “It’s kinda disgusting …”.

Comparisons with Sweden and the same kind of efforts for social housing during the 1960s called the “Million Program” came up:
Adam: It really was, I mean, you talk about divides and of course there are divides in Sweden, but it became very, very clear what they’re really all about in South Africa … like, we’ve got, you’ll find the same kind of initiatives in the old Million Program … that’s the kind of effort being made in South Africa. It’s the same thing, really, only more apparent, since the poorest people around here are so much worse off than the poorest people in Sweden …

Amidst the discussions on problems and vulnerability in the South African society, the student teachers were impressed by all the work being done and the strong discourse on democratisation. Adam reflects on this, underlining the impression on peoples’ genuine belief in democracy and how this had opened his eyes:

Adam: …they believe really strongly in the idea of democracy since it’s so fresh, but still … they really, really believe in democracy. It’s so genuine, this belief, but there are still such differences … Experiencing this was a real eye-opener.

The student teachers discussed the work that is being done in townships and community centres that they had visited, where great efforts were made. South Africa has been branded a country of apartheid and townships, as Lisa mentions, but is now a nation where significant changes are made. She found this uplifting:

Lisa: … I mean, South Africa has been branded a country of apartheid and townships and that’s what still signifies it, but it was evident that it’s also a country wanting to make progress just like any other, that there’s development and a clear focus on its citizens, at least in the poor areas, which are going to be regenerated. It was really uplifting.

As shown above, the themes of segregation and democratic change in South Africa ran like a thread through many of the student teachers’ reflections in the interviews. The student teachers made comparisons with Swedish society and living experiences from there. To compare and contrast something that is new to oneself is important in building knowledge and when trying to understand the world. But it also raises issues of stereotyping and “othering”, an issue that will be dealt with in the discussion.

4.2. Engaged teachers with social pathos

The Swedish student teachers were impressed by many of the teachers they met. They reflected on the South African teachers’ workload, many pupils in classes, scarce resources and troublesome environments for many schools. This brought the question of who actually chooses to become a teacher in South Africa today. Niclas raised the issue:

Niclas: There’s the financial part … Who decides to become a teacher in this society? If you consider XX school, those teachers spent enormous amounts of time on after-school activities … I mean, we complain about having 45-hour working weeks, but theirs must be 50–60 hours.
Jesper continues the discussion on teachers’ working conditions, referring to a
teacher that taught in a “doubled” classroom: the wall had been torn down to make
the classroom bigger. This teacher also brought up the view about teaching as a calling,
which is quite foreign to the Swedish students.

Jesper: … their teaching schedules run from at least 8 to 4 five days a week … then I
suppose they have lesson planning to do … and the one who worked at XX
school, she had double classrooms where they’d simply opened up the wall
between them and it reached so far that she had to shout her way through the
lessons … And then … she had six different classes today … maybe 45 pupils
in each …

The Swedish student teachers don’t view teachers’ work as a calling. “It used to be in
Sweden” as one of them said, but now it’s viewed as a profession. Teaching, as
articulated by Alexander, is connected to work within the public sector and this was
important for him and something that could be viewed as a calling:

Alexander: I don’t want to make commercial stuff … In that sense I can feel that
teaching is a calling … I don’t want to work to produce crap, if you see
what I mean, but work with people … within the public sector.

As can be seen from the extracts above, the experiences made the student teachers
reflect on teaching conditions in different contexts, as well as the choice of becoming a
teacher. Such experiences are important for teacher students, as underlined by
Josephine:

Josephine: … but I think it’s always worthwhile to see something outside your own
bubble, sort of, because you get really used to what you’ve got and I
believe it’s really good for you to see something else.

4.3. Violence and gender issues

Violence in schools is not an unknown issue in Swedish settings, but in the interviews it
was mainly brought up in relation to gender issues in South Africa, especially the
problem of girls being raped. The student teachers knew about the issues, but as already
mentioned earlier, the student teachers were surprised by its severity and uneasy about
being in the context where it happens to such a large extent. Richard brings this issue to
the fore:

Richard: Things got really uncomfortable today … we talked to Miss XX (teacher in
of the schools) … who brought up rapes and the rape frequency and that
pupils at her school were raped, drug abuse was on the rise … its con-
sequences … it was very … I mean, it’s the kind of thing that make you
think that what they’re saying … ah, it can’t really be happening. But, yes,
this for real, sort of … that’s all distant but this was … it’s really happening
here. And then I read an article in the paper about an 8-year-old girl who’d
been raped … it was so grotesque … honestly, I couldn’t finish reading it.

Niclas: Once every 15 seconds, a girl gets raped … I was really gutted.
In the discussion on violence, the experience from one specific classroom was often and intensively reflected on in one of the groups. In one high school class, two student teachers saw a teacher physically punishing a last-year (12th grade) pupil. One of the student teachers recounts:

Pernilla: It was a language class. After one of the pupils had finished reading a passage out loud, it was the turn of the girl sitting in front of me. The teacher asked her to read from the next page. It took a few seconds for the girl to find the page and suddenly the teacher took out a ruler from a table drawer and hit the girl. The girl spread her palm and was beaten by the teacher once more. The other pupils laughed at her. Then, the teacher continued her lesson as if nothing had happened. At the end of the lesson, the teacher told us this was done for the discipline of the class and that we are lucky that we are going to teach younger children.

Corporal punishment of pupils has been completely forbidden in South Africa since 1996 but is still reported to occur (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010; Morrell, 2001). As it is forbidden, it also became an ethical issue in the teacher student group whether to report the incident or not. The incident raised many questions concerning relations between teachers and students, on classroom management and—not least—on children’s rights.

Furthermore, gender issues, as well as other social categorisations, were raised when discussing identity issues and the positioning within class and ethnicity, both in Sweden and South Africa. One of the student teachers pointed out that the issue of gender often seems to be forgotten when discussing social categorisations, in spite of being the most important one in his view. Here, gender is mentioned in a discussion concerning boys’ schooling and how they often seem to get more attention than girls:

Alexander: But I often feel that rowdy boys get so much attention in Sweden too. As soon as there are issues involving black or immigrant students you lose the gender perspective, because class and ethnicity are held to be more important. I imagine girls suffer the most from this, I mean, in this society the biggest problem the way I see it … it’s gender … a patriarchal structure crosses all cultural and ethnic boundaries and yet it’s the one least talked about. We talk a lot about ethnicity and culture, but gender is overlooked and it really annoys me.

The issue of gender in relation to violence was often discussed as in the excerpt above. They raised the question whether a female teacher would punish a high school boy in the way she did with the girl? It is quite a disturbing issue to reflect on.

4.4. Pedagogy and views on teaching and learning

Pedagogy and teaching styles in a South African context are in many ways different from those in Sweden. The student teachers were aware of the history and the general features of the socio-political situation in South Africa but also of big classes and the scarce resources in many schools. Even so, the pedagogy raised many discussions and reflections, among them the issue of the hierarchically based transfer of knowledge from teacher to pupils. One student teacher was upset:
Alexander: But I’m really upset about the pedagogy ... From what I’ve seen in all classrooms there’s a teacher who has the right answer—the key—and then the pupils are supposed to reproduce this key. In all English lessons, they’re asked to interpret a poem and then the teacher has decided ... in two different schools, the approach was the same ...and a teacher who’s already decided how it should be done.

Another student, Niclas, did not agree on this view on the teaching style, sharing an example of the opposite:

Niclas: I actually have to disagree, because today at the first school we were at, one of the ... the first maths teacher I followed, she talked a lot about these things and told her pupils “I’ll never ever give you the right answer. All I will give you is the means to problematise, that is, my job is to turn you into problem-solvers. If you have a problem, you should have methods of solving these. I’ll never tell you the right answer. I’ll show you the roads but never the destination.”

Niclas had seen other teachers and referred especially to a teacher in mathematics that had been “very, very good” in his view. In discussing this, Alexander replied that he had also visited her class and in his opinion, the mathematics teacher talked all the time herself: “there were no dialogues and very little interchange” in the classroom. To this, Niclas agreed, and they then concluded that the teaching style in the South African schools rests on the idea about transferring knowledge from the teacher’s desk, but that the mathematics teacher did her very best within this framework. Also, Lisa, coming from a humanistic subject area, reflected on the way teaching was acted out in the literature classroom. The teacher herself, in Lisa’s view, told the students how to interpret a play of Shakespeare, which hinders a polyphonic classroom:

Lisa: ... but in humanities there are many different destinations you may reach ... and when you point all pupils in the same direction you don’t get that diversity in the classroom [...] in other words, this polyphonic classroom where every voice should be heard and all answers are allowed, where there’s freedom of opinion and freedom of speech, those fundamental democratic rights. There are so many values in Swedish schools that shine through in our teaching as well.

On the other hand, Lisa continues, it seems as if Swedish teachers don’t know how to push teaching and instruction forward, which she really thinks was done in this South African classroom:

Lisa: But then there’s also a flaw in the Swedish school system and what we say in Swedish schools ... that you’re supposed to take everything and all aspects into account, which at the same time weakens the actual teaching ... When everybody’s needs and wishes are to be accommodated, nothing really happens ... There’s nothing to drive us forward, but the teachers we met had it, they put their teaching in the direction they wanted it to go.
The experiences in South African schools made the student teachers reflect a lot on teaching styles and teaching methods, on how to interact with pupils and on differences between schools in Sweden and South Africa.

5. Conclusion

As Sweden is usually described as a Nordic country with relatively high equity and a strong welfare system, educationally influenced by progressivism and sociocultural theories, one can ask if a field study to South Africa for teacher students is a relevant thing to do. Do comparisons between such different contexts in a short field study even create more stereotypes and “othering” than understanding global issues leading to knowledge growth for the student teachers?

Much in the student teachers’ reflections documented above gives a record of experiences from South Africa of engaged and involved teachers trying to give as much as they could to their pupils regardless of the long working hours, a large number of pupils in the class and shortage of necessary teaching resources. In their reflections on schools the student teachers talked over teaching methods used and the Eurocentric content of the subjects taught. A strict discipline and harshness towards children, segregation, inequality and gender injustices were additional factors discussed. However, not only negative sides of South Africa were experienced and talked about by the student teachers. There are also impressions of a nation trying to establish democracy in spite of social consequences of injustice and segregation from the bygone apartheid system and of dedicated and involved teachers with a strong social pathos who work hard in trying to educate children into good future citizens of South Africa.

Based on their field experiences, the student teachers reflected on the situation in Sweden. The teaching methods in the Swedish education system with a strong focus on each individual and how pupils are acting in their school environment were critically talked over. They also reflected on the increasing gap between different social groups in Swedish society.

Thus, it is a complex and contradictory picture the student teachers showed in their reflections. We would argue that it is not possible to conclude that the student teachers became more interculturally competent during this short field study. However, the most interesting and important result as we interpret it, is that the student teachers in their reflections to a high degree turn their attention back to their own national context for critical comparisons. As argued by Aydarova and Marquardt (2016) engaging pre-service student teachers in examining their own assumptions about educational systems in other countries is important and might further their professional development. As shown above through the student teachers’ voices, they also paid a lot of attention to asymmetrical power relations and unjust power distribution and how this affected teaching and learning in each situation.

Thus, the student teachers were made aware of how different conditions affect pupils’ learning. Regardless of society, everyone is influenced by the historical, social, political and economic reality of the society in which they live. These are very general conclusions, but experienced “in reality” this is something else, as the student teachers underlined. This is in line with earlier research, emphasising that especially student teachers need face-to-face experiential learning with people different from themselves if
they are to develop cross-cultural skills and competence (cf. Chavez & O’Donnell, 1998). The student teachers all underlined that even short field studies like that reported here are important and worth the intensive work. We argue that student teachers through this come to understand themselves as learners and future teachers in a deeper and more sensitive way. This is important, not the least in today’s Europe where knowledge and skills to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse settings is the norm.

It is worth underlining that this is a qualitative study where data from two short field studies are analysed. Our findings indicate the importance of internationalisation, even of short field studies, and how this can broaden teacher students’ perspectives. The issue of “othering” was often discussed, and through our analyses we also underline that it is important what the students have studied before their study visits and that this issue is dealt with in discussions and reflections in the field.

Field studies abroad are much discussed in the literature and can be challenging and learning experiences for student teachers as shown in our research. However, as only a small percentage of student teachers take part and become exposed to global themes in this way, many other initiatives must be developed in teacher education departments to further student teachers’ intercultural competence in order to meet and work in a globalised world and in classrooms consisting of diverse learners. The challenge is to build courses where an international and comparative perspective acts as a natural part of the content and where conditions for mobility are visible in the programme structures. As our research underlines through the voices from one of the student teachers: “… when you meet people it kind of grabs your heart … you get really affected by it, the actual situation …”.

Notes

1. The university from where the local policy is taken will not be given by name for ethical reasons.
2. The length of Swedish teacher education depends on the subject and the level for teaching and can take between 3,5 up to 5,5 years. See, for example, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, “Sweden—Teacher training—basic and specialist teacher training”, https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/sweden/national-overview/teacher-training-basic-and-specialist-teacher-training [Online 171,121].
3. The first group consisted of six female student teachers selected out of 11 applicants. Out of these 11 applicants, one was a male and was not chosen, as he didn’t fulfil the requirements. The second group consisted of three female and five male student teachers. In this group, all applicants were given the opportunity to participate in the field study. The student teachers had to write a formal application to motivate their participation. There was also a personal interview with staff from the department and international office at the Faculty of Education.
4. Under apartheid, the South African population was divided into four categories: black, coloured, Asian/Indian and white. This categorisation by race is removed by law, but the terms are still used in categorising schools, teachers and pupils (Abraham, 2010).
5. The themes the student teachers bring up are all discussed in the research literature on education and schooling in South Africa. However, since the focus of this article is Swedish student teachers’ reflections regarding a short field study in South Africa, we will refer to this literature only in some specific cases.
6. Former model C-schools are schools that were given autonomy in the 1980s to administer themselves. This autonomy included deciding on school fee and what group of learners to
admit. In post-apartheid South Africa, all schools are officially open for all, but still different groups of students attend different schools (Abraham, 2010, p. 82).

7. Several of the teachers the student teachers visited in the schools were prepared for the school visit, but this was certainly not the case for all teachers. This means that some might have been chosen, as they were “special”, i.e. very committed, and this was definitely the case for the teachers that had previously taken part in the exchange program. But the student teachers also met many other teachers, since they were very generously welcomed into many classrooms in the schools.

8. The incident was reported to the South African colleague who we cooperated with in South Africa. Even though an incident like this happened only once, we bring it up, since it prompted a large number of discussions in the student teacher group. Furthermore, this is a problem in many parts of the world in spite of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on the Rights of the Child. Important to us is to work for social justice and eradicate victimisation of children in school.

9. Here, the student teacher most likely refers to a work by the educator Olga Dysthe. Her book “Det flerstämmiga klassrummet—Att skriva och samtala för att lära” [The Polyphonic Classroom—To Write and Converse for Learning] (1996) is common course literature in Swedish teacher education.

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