

Final Report - Transnational Virtual Exchange for Social Justice Education

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Introduction:

In this study, we reflect on our experiences of conceptualizing and implementing an online series of dialogues between student teachers in the United States and South Africa. The virtual exchange program took place in the context of COVID-19 lockdown and its related travel restrictions, which made traditional student exchange programs unworkable (Yildirim, Bostanci, Yildirim & Erdogan, 2021). Twenty-one undergraduate pre-service teachers from the University of North Georgia (UNG) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) were included in the project. There is a comparable contextual basis for the discussions between students at these universities: South Africa and Georgia have similar educational contexts where, despite *de jure* racial segregation being prohibited, *de facto* racialized school segregation continues into the present. Whereas segregated schooling was legally prohibited in the United States in terms of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), it was the South African Schools Act (1996) that finally ended the racialized schooling policy that was inherited from the apartheid regime. In the pilot project that we reflect on in this article, we sought to use these comparable contexts, from which our students come, as the basis to explore social justice education – as both epistemology and praxis – that is often neglected in formalized university curricula. Many of the students attending these universities come from families with limited financial resources (Van Zyl, Dampier & Ngwenya, 2020), and for whom international travel and exchange would have been all but impossible. It was thus our intention to increase diversity in the experiences that contribute to international exchange programs, which far too often sideline the participation and experiences of people from poor and working-class backgrounds (Gerhard & Hans, 2013; Whatley, LaVenture & Russell, 2022), often resulting in widespread under-representation of people of color in such exchange programs (Mazyck, 2014). The researchers for this project conceptualized and facilitated these virtual exchange dialogues, and we bring to these discussions our own perspectives and positionalities. Whereas one of the researchers is a straight Black woman with a background in cultural anthropology, the other is a queer white man with a background in literary studies. We were thus closely attuned to the power of personal narratives in shaping how experiences are communicated and understood.

Literature Review:

Virtual exchange (VE) can be defined as the use of technology to connect people, often internationally, for the purposes of education and increased global competencies. There are various approaches to conducting virtual exchange and, prior to 2020, it was primarily used for the purpose of foreign language education (O'Dowd, 2018). While these programs have been facilitated since the 1990s, the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a turning point for virtual international programs (Whatley, Woodman & Glass, 2022). The interest in VE for educators increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the general lack of mobility for participants to experience in-person study abroad programs, which is one aspect of the appeal of online programs in the higher education context. Another potential benefit of VE is that of equalizing the inherent inequalities in international education, as described in the work of multiple

authors for the related special issue of the *Journal of International Students* in 2022. While traditional study abroad program participants are primarily white female students from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds, VE programs can target a wider range of participants who are underrepresented in international programs (Whatley, LaVenture & Russell, 2022). VE can serve to democratize programs, providing participants from a range of demographics with cross-cultural communication skills, global awareness, increased adaptability to other cultures, and technological competence (Alami et al., 2022; Devereux & Glenn, 2022; Poe, 2022; Whatley, LaVenture & Russell, 2022). By prioritizing activities that explore social justice and ensuring equitable participation, VE programs can also address and disrupt the existing power dynamics in traditional in-person exchanges (Kastler & Lewis, 2021).

To provide context for the dynamics of our VE project, it is important to consider the historical and current factors of social justice and education in both South Africa and the United States. Since *de jure* segregation in both countries ended, continued disparities particularly for Black students (and Hispanic/Latinx students in the U.S. context, and coloured students in the South African context), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those from rural areas are pervasive. In both countries, the remnants of racial segregation are apparent in the unequal opportunities for quality education available to students from P-12 schools through higher education. Although unequal infrastructure is an essential area that needs to be addressed by policymakers (Jansen, 2019), teacher education is a key site for improving the quality of teachers and their abilities to navigate uncertain and under-resourced contexts. In South Africa, teacher education itself faces significant challenges that point to the importance of extra-curricular interventions being developed within the universities' initial teacher education (ITE) programs. Firstly, the most qualified teachers, which includes those who have obtained successive postgraduate degrees, tend to work in the top public and private schools, resulting in the least qualified and least experienced graduates working in poorer schools (Motala & Carel, 2019). Secondly, there is often a very limited uptake of in-service teacher development opportunities (Shalem & De Clercq, 2019), despite the fact that there are devastating deficits in in-service teachers' disciplinary content knowledge in areas as basic as primary school mathematics (Venkat & Spaul, 2015: 8; Taylor, 2019) and reading comprehension (Taylor, 2019). Given the significant gaps in teachers' disciplinary competencies, in-service teacher development programmes tend to focus on core topics in mathematics and literacy (Shalem & De Clercq, 2019), leaving little space for additional teacher development programmes related to topics in social justice education. It is this gap in teacher education that is one of the key motivators for our VE intervention.

Much like the challenges faced in South Africa following the end of apartheid, the United States faced the colossal task of transforming its segregated education system post-*Brown*. However, in the decades since then, the school system continues to be structured along racial lines (Frankenberg et al., 2019). Within the wider context of higher education in the United States, which is impacted by national and global politics, shifting demographics, and economic ebbs and flows, the training of the country's teachers is shaped by additional factors. Teacher education in the U.S. context currently has to contend with the challenges of teacher shortages, efforts toward the deprofessionalization of the field, relatively low average salaries, and the added strain of pandemic responses that varied within and between school districts and states (Pressley & Ha, 2021; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019; Wronowski & Urick, 2021). State-level governance of schools and control over curricula pose overarching issues that impact the public school system as related to existing disparities in

socioeconomic status, region, and student demographics. In some states, such as Georgia, there is a current resurgence of legislation aimed at censoring curricula in P-16 institutions that threatens the control teachers have over the content they deliver in classrooms. Additionally, teacher education programs have been ramping up efforts to prepare pre-service and current teachers to provide inclusive instruction in classrooms that have distinct student demographics from the teachers themselves. This relates to diversity in terms of socioeconomic and ethnic/cultural factors. Attempts to resolve these intersecting obstacles and improve the state of teacher education have led scholars to call for the effective incorporation of social justice education and humanizing pedagogy in the field (Carter Andrews et al., 2019a; Bartell, Cho, Drake, Petchauer, & Richmond, 2019; Cochran-Smith, 2009; Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009; Del Carmen Salazar, 2013). The proposed solutions entail a focus on critical inquiry, self-reflection, resistance, and transformation within teacher education that promotes holistic teaching practices and encourage mutual humanization.

For the purposes of developing responsive teacher candidates, educator preparation programs have had to rethink priorities as related to successful approaches to teacher training that *center*, rather than just *consider*, the social-emotional needs and distinct backgrounds of their students (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Beyond the practicalities of changes in pedagogical strategy and the use of technology within and outside of classrooms, teacher preparation must also factor in and adapt to the needs and vulnerabilities of P-12 students during tumultuous times. Teacher educators should also prepare our teacher candidates to confront and disrupt existing policies and practices that fail to adequately support their students. Required for this vision of teacher education, one that promotes transformative pedagogies, are innovative approaches that encourage dialogue for critical consciousness (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Pre-service and current educators have to understand the sociopolitical nature of their work and engage in the development of critical pedagogy as part of their training in order to be change agents within their schools and communities. A relevant aspect of this training for the project described here is the need for pre-service teachers to cultivate their knowledge around globalization and their engagement in sharing educational practices within global contexts (Goodwin, 2020).

Methodology:

The VE program for this project was developed over multiple conversations during which we developed a focal topic and discussed critical components laid out in the Stevens Initiative Virtual Exchange Academy. One of our researchers attended the Academy in March 2021 and shared resources and relevant information for developing this project. With an established plan for our VE program, we each secured IRB/ethical clearance from our institutions. Participants for our VE program comprised current or former students in our teacher education programs, or more broadly from pre-program education majors in the case of the University of North Georgia. The goal was to include six students from each institution for each of three rounds of sessions with the hope that multiple students would be able to participate on the Zoom meetings. These were scheduled in the morning in United States Eastern Time and in the afternoons in South African Standard Time in order to ensure participant availability.

In order to actively engage teacher candidates from our institutions in distinct contexts in facilitated online discussions, we chose the topic of segregation and desegregation of public schools as a starting point. Both the United States, and particularly the Southeast region that includes Georgia, and urban areas in South Africa, such as Johannesburg, have similar trajectories of *de jure* and *de facto* racial

segregation that have influenced every aspect of public education in PK-16 institutions. Considering the impact of race and ethnicity on the participants’ experiences of school would be a relevant exercise for our diverse groups of students and provide us with a foundation for exploring comparative South African and U.S. educational issues. Each 90-minute session was scheduled via Zoom for participants to join from their individual devices, usually their phones or laptops. Students who confirmed participation were sent an initial email with some basic information and terminology regarding schooling in the South African and U.S. contexts. In advance of each session, the facilitators emailed materials to review prior to the Zoom meeting, as well as potential discussion questions related to the content and their own educational experiences to consider. The sessions were structured around the following themes:

Session 1	Locating the self in context: Personal experiences of education
Session 2	Race and inequality: The relevance of the past in the present
Session 3	Contemporary educational interventions and the role of social justice education

The materials included podcast episodes and brief news articles and gave the participants a common starting point for the dialogues. We facilitated three sessions each with three cohorts of student participants from both institutions between April 2021 and May 2022. Cohort One included eight total participants, Cohort Two included seven participants, and Cohort Three also included seven participants. The researchers both participated in each session and alternated leading individual sessions or questions within each session. The audio of the sessions were recorded and later transcribed using Rev.com. We then utilized the transcriptions to identify themes for the purpose of coding each session accordingly.

Some of the logistical challenges that we encountered included scheduling, access to mobile data, and, subsequently, full participation throughout each round of sessions. To coordinate between our researchers’ schedules along with those of the students at each institution was difficult due to the incongruity between our semester/quarter systems and academic calendars, as well as the difference in time zones (six to seven hours depending on daylight savings). For the UJ students whose campus was closed for the first two rounds of sessions, additional obstacles to participation stemmed from a lack of access to consistent Wi-Fi, the cost of data when Wi-Fi was unavailable, and the fact of loadshedding (i.e. daily scheduled blackouts in South Africa). Participants in our program could use any device to connect to Zoom, but the issue of Wi-Fi or adequate data and power meant that some students were not always able to participate in each session. On both sides, students faced scheduling challenges due to the aforementioned issues or due to work and personal responsibilities. One UNG participant in the first cohort, for example, attended a virtual session from her job and only used the chat feature because she was unable to speak while at work. Despite these difficulties, the participants made clear efforts to participate and fully “showed up” then they did.

Findings:

The main themes that we identified from the VE sessions are as follow:

1. Students used the online platform to reflect on their own and others' experiences from a comparative perspective, highlighting similarities in the historical and ongoing racial and socio-economic systemic inequalities in both contexts.
2. Students located their own desire to become teachers in their personal experiences of school, evidencing a deep investment in the ethical foundations of teaching and a growing awareness of social justice education.
3. Students foregrounded their individual identities, emphasizing (1) how language proficiency and multilingualism function as either barriers to or resources for accessing education; and (2) how race/ethnicity was their primary determinant of their experience of education.
4. Students' experiences and perspectives were shaped by the immediacy of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each round of virtual exchange dialogues provided in-depth glimpses into the ways that our teacher candidates have experienced education through lenses that were both very personal and also generalizable in terms of their racialized and class-based contexts. It is important to note that none of the participants had participated in study abroad, nor were they likely to be considering the opportunities available within our institutions and the levels of participation among our teacher candidates. Most striking was how students, some of whom had had very little exposure to social justice education, were able to deftly navigate the complexities of racism and inequality without reproducing essentialist positionings. Student responses were insightful and boldly connected historical contexts to contemporary realities. A student observed that “what we talked about allowed us to be vulnerable” to be able to discuss personal experiences of historical events (Participant 1, USA), later adding that these discussions allow us to “understand how we ourselves experienced these injustices, so we each can bring something unique [...] to the classroom” (Participant 1, USA). In a longer written reflection about the experience, a student wrote:

segregation played a role in the type of education that learners receive. Although it ended a while ago in both countries, the aftereffects are still affecting the current generations. As teachers it is important to be conscious about our learners' background. Sometimes the learners that come from disadvantaged places are hanging on to education as their last hope, and if a teacher is not conscious of where the learners come from they can be the cause of those learners to give up completely (Participant 4, SA)

Evidencing a similarly affective response, another student observed that:

when preservice teachers experience these exchanges they experience firsthand how it feels to interact with different points of view. This means that they can speak to students about what it means to willfully go out of your way to gain a fresh perspective. Students are more inclined to believe them if they can speak from experience. It also allows pre-service teachers to understand what it means to teach with empathy and compassion (Participant 5, SA)

For these participants, the virtual exchanges went beyond what the two researchers had anticipated – that is, sharing of knowledge about personal contexts and experiences. What these observations point to is that although there was extensive sharing of context-specific information, the students had also internalized the experience and there was already a demonstrable shift in their approach to thinking about the complex relationships between similarity and difference that is so central to understanding race and education from comparative perspectives.

The participants also demonstrated a grasp of the importance of comparative policy-making within national and state-wide education reform, with one South African participant noting that “It is [...] important to understand the education systems and challenges so that when looking to integrate aspects of another countries education system we are aware of how it is used and how it may benefit us” (Participant 3, SA). The importance of diversity in enriching comparative education studies was evidenced when a student observed that he thinks virtual exchanges are “extremely important, because I feel as if teachers in one area of the world are taught different customs and ways to teach” (Participant 7, USA). There was a general agreement amongst the students that engaging in virtual exchange allowed them to “connect with others to come up with solutions for these problems [in their educational contexts]” (Participant 3, SA) and to “compare what our country is doing to others we can see where we are exceeding and we can also see what we need to work on” (Participant 1, USA). One student succinctly concluded that “discussing challenges will assist teachers with ideas to improve the experience of their learners” (Participant 2, SA). Given the unique challenges posed by the sudden shift to remote teaching and learning due to COVID-19, the participants showed sustained interest in different ways that different countries were responding. One participant observed that she was particularly excited to “learn a lot of information about how South Africa is doing right now amidst the pandemic” (Participant 1, USA), with another participant elaborating: “Something that stood out to me when learning about the schooling in South Africa, was how WhatsApp was changing and helping the students. The app allowed some students to learn and be [tutored] through the app and I thought was amazing to see” (Participant 6, USA).

It was also striking how the students foregrounded a facilitated experience of empathy in their responses to the virtual exchange dialogues. A participant explained that: “This experience reinforced my belief that if we open our ears and make the effort to be active listeners with people of different backgrounds, we’ll find that we have more in common with those seemingly different than us” (Participant 5, SA).

Another student explained that “[w]hen actively listening to others, as we did in the virtual exchange, we are exercising the ability to empathize with others” (Participant 5, SA). The experiences of empathy were similarly foregrounded by other students: whereas one student pointed out that the dialogues helped him see “the bubble I’ve lived in” (Participant 7, USA), another student wrote that she realized that “we need to be considerate of students who may be poor at home, or whose parents face problems of their own” (Participant 1, USA). Another student added that “[m]any students, primarily black students, still struggle with many issues” across both contexts, including “significantly less funding, overcrowding, inadequate supplies and even insufficient teacher pay” (Participant 6, USA).

Finally, a surprising response from several of the students was how the virtual exchange dialogues provided them with a rare platform to interrogate social justice issues in their *own* context or university. One student wrote that she:

also got to hear the perspectives of other students who attend the University of North Georgia. I actually had many similar experiences with other students with how our previous schools dealt with socioeconomic issues. I was upset to hear that some of my peers have experienced or at least heard of other students going through a rough time at home (Participant 1, USA).

Another American student echoed this sentiment, noting that, while the focus was ostensibly about transnational dialogues, she realized that “there are also students in the United States that feel as if

[their] experience in education has not always been the best in their eyes either” (Participant 7, USA). A similar sense of awakening was also evidenced by two of the South African participants. While one student observed that the discussions “confirmed that social justice is not a reality in our country” (Participant 2, SA), another student pointed out that she had seldom thought about the schooling system outside of her own privileged experience of it, writing that “I didn’t really think much about South Africa as a whole” (Participant 3, SA).

Implications:

- **Conclusions for Institutions and Organizations:** What might organizations or institutions who support VE or are interested in VE learn from these findings?

Our findings point to applications for VE in the areas of teacher education and social justice, demonstrating the impact that facilitated online discussions can have on students’ perspectives of schooling and education. The participants in this project expressed improved cultural competence, interest in global educational issues, and understanding of the ways in which in/equity and access to resources shape our experiences of schooling. Students in each cohort were vulnerable and able to share their own experiences of school in these sessions, connecting their educational backgrounds to salient aspects of their identities and their motivations to become educators. More broadly, this project demonstrates the ways in which students in higher education can engage in intercultural dialogues focused on issues of social justice that lead to critical reflection, interpersonal connection, and further development of skills in empathy and care.

- **Recommendations for VE Practitioners:** At the individual teacher/facilitator level, what can be taken away to improve practice?

As VE facilitators, we find it important to create spaces where students’ voices are centered and valued. While we had a role in creating the foundation for these virtual discussions and in clarifying specific terms/concepts for the participants, we also stepped back enough to allow our students to express their reflections in our Zoom rooms. The students were, therefore, able to pose questions to each other, to build on the statements and experiences of others, and to glean insight from the dialogues without excessive intervention from their faculty facilitators.

- **Further Directions for Research:** Based on this research, what further efforts are needed to gain important insights? What would a scaled version of this project look like and hope to achieve? What new research questions were discovered as a part of this effort?

Future directions for research as related to this project include: 1) additional aspects of sociocultural diversity in education, such as gender identity/sexuality and disability, and 2) teacher education faculty exploring topics in social justice education. Exploring various aspects of diversity in schools would provide further insight into the perspectives of pre-service teachers in these distinct contexts. Through facilitated discussions with teacher educators from our institutions, we could address ways in which diversity and social justice are both included and excluded within our curricula. This would provide opportunities to develop effective strategies for further incorporating social justice education into our courses and preparing our students for diverse school environments.

- Appendices:
 - A. School Structure 8background information provided to participants in advance of first session (attached).
 - B. Materials provided to students in advance to focus discussions
 - a. Session 1 – Review School Structure background information (Appendix A) prior to meeting.
 - b. Session 2 – Participants asked to listen to podcast (Part One or all if time allowed) prior to meeting:
<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/562/the-problem-we-all-live-with-part-one>
 - c. Session 3 – Participants asked to read the following brief articles and listen to the podcast (22 min total) linked below:
 - i. <https://iono.fm/e/927413>
 - ii. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/south-africa-children-school-drop-out-covid-19/>
 - iii. <https://www.gpb.org/news/2020/08/26/inequality-gap-among-atlanta-students-may-grow-due-covid-19-pandemic-experts-say>

A. Background Information

Online etiquette:

- We might discuss some sensitive topics as part of this study, and we would appreciate your patience and careful listening to other participants' perspectives. We should work to create a safe space where different people's experiences can be shared without judgement. Participants who do not contribute positively to such a respectful environment might be asked to leave the discussion session.

School structure:

- Children at schools in South Africa are usually called learners, whereas they are usually referred to as students in the United States.
- Schools in South Africa and the US state of Georgia do not follow the same school structure.

South Africa	Grade	Georgia, USA
Primary School	R	Kindergarten
	1	Elementary School
	2	" "
	3	" "
	4	" "
	5	" "
	6	Middle School
High School / Secondary School	7	" "
	8	" "
	9	High School
	10	" "
	11	" "
	12	" "

University teacher training:

- South African students complete a four-year qualification called a Bachelor of Education (B Ed), usually specialising in a particular phase (primary school is divided between Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase). Once completed, the graduates register with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and can then begin teaching as qualified teachers. As part of this four-year degree, the student-teachers will complete

several weeks of WIL (work integrated learning), which involves observing and teaching at a school. The students at UJ will usually do most of these practicum weeks at a school attached to the university called Funda Ujabule.

- Educator preparation programs (EPPs) in the United States tend to vary somewhat by state. In Georgia, undergraduate students at accredited institutions complete four-year degrees (Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts, depending on the area of concentration) that include the internships and required assessments to become certified to teach. The possible programs include Elementary and Special Education, Middle Grades Education (two subject-area concentrations), Secondary Education (with a specific content area), Music (Bachelor of Music degree), Art, and Kinesiology. Students at UNG conduct internships with classroom teachers during their junior and senior years (3rd and 4th years) in their program of study and take over teaching for three months in their last semester. Our Field Placement Office handles the placement of our student teachers at more than 40 K-12 schools in partner school districts in our region. <https://ung.edu/college-of-education/index.php>

Race:

- All countries have different histories of race and racism, and there are very different contestations about the meaning behind different terms. While we will sometimes see powerful overlaps, it is important to remember that certain words mean different things in different contexts. For example, the term “coloured” in South Africa refers to a complex system of racial classification in which different ethnic groups who did not fit neatly into apartheid’s other categories of “white”, “black” or “Indian” were grouped together under the term coloured. This group also included people who are mixed-race or had interracial family histories. Some people in South Africa claim the identity “coloured” with pride, whereas some other people reject the term. In the United States, the term “coloured” has a different history.
- Racial categories in the United States, as elsewhere, are fluid and dependent on sociopolitical contexts. While race is a social construct, the terms and associated identities have powerful implications for individuals and groups in our societies. Currently, the racial categories utilized in the U.S. context include: white, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American & Pacific Islander (AAPI), and Native American. Outside of white Americans, other groups have hyphenated identities--ones that include their ethnic makeup and "American" as secondary. The term "colored" was once used for African Americans (similar to "negro"), but it is no longer considered acceptable for use in U.S. society. More information about changing census categories through history can be found here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/what-census-calls-us/>

Background information about education –

Please see the links below to read more about the other country's education system:

- For more information about education in the United States: <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/06/education-in-the-united-states-of-america>
- For more information about education in South Africa: