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# "I Don't Even Know Where Turkey Is.": Developing Intercultural Competence through E-pal Exchanges

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## Abstract

Using current events to help preservice teachers understand the world they live in encourages preservice teachers to learn about global issues. It also encourages them to develop skills in analytical thinking and reflective judgment by reading and discussing complex real-life scenarios. A semester-long pen-pal project was crafted to help understand how preservice teachers develop intercultural competence, critical empathy, and become less ethnocentric. Twenty-Six American early childhood preservice teachers in a Midwestern state were randomly paired with Turkish early childhood preservice teachers as their pen-pals. The findings of this qualitative study revealed American preservice teachers had learning curves, but many eventually came to unpack their privileges and preconceived notions, as well as expand their worldviews. Implications of how to assist preservice teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students are addressed.

**Keywords:** international pen-pals, empathy, cultural and linguistic diversity, teacher preparation, intercultural dialogue

## Introduction

The world has become smaller due to the advances of technology and globalization. Globalization brings greater cultural and linguistic diversity to communities and education systems all over the world. To address the growing diversity in today's classrooms, teachers need an expanded set of skills and attitudes to support effective learning (Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016). In other words, teachers are expected to know their students and how they learn. Leasky (2015) also shares the same stance and suggests teachers need to create a classroom culture which values diversity and ensures learners from all backgrounds are heard. She believes using student diversity as a tool is critical. Further, Leasky posits good teaching enables meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement, and prepares students for life in a globalized world. The case study illustrates how current events could be embedded in the content to help preservice teachers become more culturally and linguistically aware and examine their own belief systems. Specifically, the study discloses the impact of an international pen-pal project on American early childhood preservice teachers.

Providing opportunities for authentic engagement with global issues can help individuals develop a thorough understanding of the complexity of societal issues (Lindsay, 2017). Lindsay further emphasizes helping students connect beyond the classroom supports global citizenship and competency. It allows students to frame an understanding of the world through connected experiences beyond the limitations of face-to-face interactions. This tactic can be extremely

helpful for preservice teachers who will work with diverse children, families, and their communities in the future. As a result, teachers are recommended to have students engage in real global issues. This may take the form of pen pal and Skype exchanges with schools in other countries and service-learning projects emphasizing issues of global concern. Recognizing that not all preservice teachers would have the opportunities to study abroad or to meet people from abroad locally, a pen-pal project was developed to help preservice teachers to develop (inter)cultural awareness and intercultural competence to work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Using current events to help preservice teachers understand the world they live in encourages preservice teachers to learn about global issues as well as develop skills in analytical thinking and reflective judgment by reading and discussing complex real-life scenarios.

Hoeflinger (2012) argues there is a pressing need to expand American students' understanding of the world, calling on educators to use approaches such as current events, international pen pals, and global studies to broaden students' interest in and knowledge of other cultures and world affairs. Increasingly, diverse classrooms require teachers to examine the appropriateness of teaching practices for varying student populations. With high expectation for schools to account for student achievement inclusively, a growing interest in culturally responsive practices necessitates more investigation of learning and instruction through a cultural lens. Through the infusion of current events into classroom content, Galczynski, Tsagkaraki, and Ghosh (2011) argue it may yield discussions which lead students to think critically and to unpack privilege in order to raise students' awareness of the politics of differences.

Previous research also indicates when college students are able to engage in intergroup dialogue, provided the environment is safe and pleasant, such an encounter can reduce cultural barriers and prejudice, as well as contribute to intercultural competences (e.g., Goncalves, 2011). The intercultural and intergroup dialogue has positive cognitive and effective influences on college students (Alimo, Kelly, & Clark, 2002; Goncalves, 2011; Gurin, Nagda, & Sorensen, 2011; Ozelik & Paprika, 2010; Wach & Mickiewicz, 2015). Moreover, by engaging preservice teachers in peer dialogues, Lapp (2001) found her students' professional knowledge and skills increased. Wash and Mickiewicz (2015) also found that intercultural dialogue between preservice teachers stimulated reflective conversation and provided participants with great opportunities to analyze situations which they have experienced. The impact of intercultural dialogue on classroom teaching and learning therefore can be tremendous. It affects not only college students but also the way college faculty facilitate students' learning and how well they engage students in the curriculum (Clark, 2005). Evidently, as faculty members shift in their pedagogical styles to allow for greater influences on their students' learning, students can also benefit from such dialogic pedagogy.

Both Achrazoglou (2010) and Lindsay (2017) posit technology can play an important role in bringing together and integrating different viewpoints, beliefs, and lifestyles. Further, online dialogues can create a safe community in which preservice teachers can state their viewpoints and learn from others according to Lacina and Sowa (2005). Therefore, intercultural dialogue in the form of online pen pals can facilitate this project's goal of teaching through direct experiences and enhance the preservice teachers' understanding of themselves, their pen pals, and how complex power is exercised in various cultures. In turn, they will be more capable of understanding the sociopolitical factors which impact the school policies, their students' learning, and their communities.

## Literature Review

While literature is limited on the specific pen-pal project described in this study, there is a host of literature which speaks to the importance of preservice teachers gaining empathy and inter-cultural competence to be effective in their classrooms and lives (e.g., Smolcic & Katunich, 2017; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). As Merryfield (2000) contends, "How can teacher educators who have never examined their own privilege or who have not personalized learning of what it feels like to live as the other prepare K-12 teachers to teach for diversity equity and interconnectedness" (p. 441)? What Merryfield proposed 18 years ago still holds true today. To prepare preservice teachers to develop into globally conscious teacher candidates, teacher educators need to prepare them for the task of reflection and at the same time examine their own values and attitudes (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008). Lin et al. argue that *internalized dialogue* requires preservice teachers to reflect on their personal cultural values and understand that many ideas they hold as truths are culturally-based.

Pilonieta, Medina, and Hathaway (2017) conducted a study on the experiences of preservice teachers in a study abroad program. They found intergroup dialogue is integral to the success of teachers in the field. Participants in this study were mostly white, monolingual women with limited experience with racial or linguistic diversity. Their study abroad experience was meant to analyze their feelings of being an outsider and their plans to teach English language learners in their classrooms. The participants in this study stated they could not have gained this empathy without experiencing the cultural and linguistic immersion first hand. However, research also indicates that often with study abroad trips, the learning occurs is incidental rather than intentional (Barron, 2003). It is posited in this research that the learning of critical empathy should be very intentional and peer intercultural dialogue via pen-pals does just that.

Smolcic and Arends (2017) have given steam to the idea that intercultural learning can occur without going abroad. Their study involved students at the same university: preservice teachers and international students learning English. The goal for both groups was learning from personal interaction with other students. Preservice teachers were expected to be better equipped to work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Smolcic and Arends found that "work with international partners stimulated an introspective process of cultural self-awareness that may not have come about through traditional course readings and discussion, nor through field experience in public school classrooms" (p. 60). The students had a heightened sense of their own cultural awareness as well as the complexity of cultural identity. Smolcic and Arends also shared some examples where preservice teachers "acknowledged larger social structures or systematic inequalities or expressed intentions to take action to work against those inequities" (p. 65). Smolcic and Arends called this *empathy*. It is evident Smolcic and Arends' findings support the notions that intentional and intercultural collaborations outside the classroom can further equip preservice teachers with the necessary critical empathy skills.

Bouton (2016) goes even further in explaining this idea. As the education field has begun to see the importance of incorporating empathy into preparation of teachers, Bouton argues that "the issue of how to incorporate and successfully prepare our educators to understand and integrate empathy into the classroom is at the forefront of research and discussion" (p. 19). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), it was projected that 4.2 million teachers would be teaching a growing number of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students in 2017 in the United States. The 4.2 million teachers in 2017 were representative of the participant sample of this study, as well as the dominating research in teacher education: White women, monolingual,

from rural or suburban homes, and middle-class backgrounds. While the teaching field continues to grow at this pace, the student population is not doing the same. With the changes in student population we see a mismatch in diversity of teachers and students, teacher education programs must continually look for ways to help better meet diversity needs (Bouton, 2016). Bouton firmly believes teaching empathy to preservice teachers is crucial.

There lies an ethical dilemma in how these teachers will respond to the students they teach. This idea was further explored through modeling by a study which focused around technology's role and an online threaded discussion conducted by Nganga in 2016. Nganga's study focused around the perceptions of preservice teachers and practices which could promote their intercultural competency. Nganga's findings suggested the idea of a planned international immersion experience to teach global/intercultural competence should be explored. Furthermore, the notion of competence can be a dangerous misnomer for preservice teachers. While immersing themselves in the other culture, it is important they do not gain the idea that all racialized and ethicized individuals are monolithic. They should also understand the idea of competency is not final. Embedding in preservice teachers the importance of continued learning is essential in preventing the dangerous conclusion they have reached. As suggested by Nganga (2016), the process of acquiring intercultural competency does not occur naturally but takes thoughtful and intentional planning. In addition, a combination of various teaching strategies can promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to be globally minded and interculturally competent would be beneficial according to Nganga.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to DeStigter (1999), critical empathy is referring to:

The process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek. (p. 240)

DeStigter believes critical empathy focuses on the context of empathy as always situated within sociohistorical forces. Critical empathy is a concept which serves as a vehicle for individuals to think about how they can relate to and develop meaningful relationships with those who are culturally and socially dramatically different from their own as DeStigter proposes. DeStigter further stresses critical empathy can help individuals "understand the powerful structures and ideologies that constrain us to think and act in prescribed (often exploitative) ways, while at the same time challenging us to break free from those constraints" (p. 240). Therefore, employing critical empathy can enable one to better question and acknowledge differences in economic, political, social, and cultural positions.

Palmer and Menard-Warwick (2012) stress the potential of critical empathy in helping teacher educators understand "when a preservice teacher confronts both his/her feelings of connection to another person and also the sociocultural limits to those feelings, s/he can gain new undertaking of how s/he and the other person are situated in the larger context" (p. 19). However, they also state the role of empathy in growth/learning has not been widely studied. Therefore, DeStigter's (1999) critical empathy is used to guide this study, which examines how American preservice teachers come to understand how sociohistorical forces impact everyday experience, and how the pen-pal experiences foster a sense of emotional connection and understanding between human

beings across different social and cultural contexts. It is hoped that American preservice teachers' empathetic experiences not only help them "foster a sense of emotional connection and understanding between human beings, but also potentially draw attention to the limits of understanding and connection across disparate social and cultural contexts" (Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012, p. 19).

Empathy is one of the most important aspects of intercultural competence, as recognized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (n.d.). Empathy leads us to experience the feelings of others and to reflect on those feelings and compare them to our own. Therefore, it is deemed as an essential skill. Developing empathy is essential as students will come from all walks of life and bring diverse ideas and cultural traditions to the classroom. Consequently, developing empathy can indeed help teachers consciously and willingly shift from their own cultural frames of reference and actively projects themselves in their students' cultures. As a result, teachers will have the intercultural knowledge and skills to deal with their students who are of diverse backgrounds.

The ability to effectively teach all learners from various cultures has become an increasingly important skill for teachers (Marx & Moss, 2011; Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012). Accordingly, the need for preservice teachers to operate outside the comfort zone of their own cultural environment has become more evident. More and more teacher education programs have employed and embedded a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which foster preservice teachers' intercultural competence and global awareness. It is imperative teacher education programs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to become familiar with other cultures to better prepare themselves for the real classrooms. As the world is becoming more connected each day, preservice teachers need their preparation to include both direct and indirect experiences in this global society.

Recognizing the fact not all preservice teachers had or will have the direct cross-cultural experience (such as study abroad) of interacting with people who are different from them culturally and linguistically, overseas or locally, a pen-pal project was developed between the predominately white, middle-class, female preservice teachers and their Turkish counterparts. This study intended to explore how early childhood preservice teachers develop the sense of empathy and the ability to analytically compare their own experiences with others while having intercultural dialogue with their international pen-pals. Specifically, the research questions constructed for this study were: 1) what are the impacts of the pen-pal project on American preservice teachers and 2) how do preservice teachers develop intercultural competence?

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Convenience sampling was employed in this study. Twenty-six female early childhood freshmen who took a multicultural education course (a required course in their sequence) participated in this pen-pal project. Most of the participants identified themselves as Midwesterners and of middle-class. Out of the 26 participants, one was Asian American and one was Black, the rest of them were White. More than half of the participants indicated they were not informed of the situation in Syria and 25 admitted that they did not know Turkey was a country and/or where it was geographically related to the U.S. prior to the study. The majority of the participants were monolingual and few

had traveled outside the U.S. Many of the participants also indicated they had very few experiences of interacting with individuals who were culturally and linguistically different from them.

### ***Data Collection***

Participants learned about the conflict in Syria and its cultural, social, and economical impact in their multicultural education course during the first week of their spring 2016 semester. There were 28 preservice teachers enrolled in this course and 26 consented to participate. The course instructor, who is the researcher of this study, recruited two Turkish early childhood faculty members who taught in Turkey to support the pen-pal project. These Turkish faculty members then recruited their students who consented to participate in this study before the semester started. Because some of the Turkish early childhood preservice teachers were not able to continue their conversations with their American participants after a few weeks due to various reasons, more than 40 Turkish pen-pals were recruited as a whole. It was not until the fourth week that all pairs started to exchange messages on a regular basis though a few pairs started from the second week.

American participants were asked to take the initiative and engage in intercultural dialogue with their Turkish pen-pals first. Specifically, participants were paired up at random with their Turkish pen-pals and were told to get acquainted with them. They were told to obtain first-hand information on the region, from the traditions and schooling, education system, and the impact of refugee children from their Turkish pen-pals who could help them understand the current situation in Turkey. Participants were asked to communicate with their pen-pals via email at least once a week for 14 weeks. Participants were not provided with specific guided questions when communicating with their pen-pals. In other words, participants were only told they would make new friends who were also early childhood preservice teachers in Ankara, Turkey.

Prior to starting the project, American participants completed Berardo and Deardorff's (2012) Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection Survey. At the end of the project, participants each wrote a guided reflection paper and completed Berardo and Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection Survey for the second time. Guiding questions focused on the impact of the pen-pal experience on preservice teachers and what they learned from engaging in this pen-pal project.

### ***Data Sources and Data Analysis***

In this qualitative study, data sources included participants' reflections, self-reflection surveys, and pen-pal notes/emails. Participants' reflections were completed at the end of study. In their individual reflections participants were asked to address what they learned from their pen-pals and the impact of the experience. Further, Berardo and Deardorff's (2012) Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection Survey is a 15-item 5-point Likert scale (5 is very high and 1 is very poor) was used. The items of the self-reflection survey include terms and phrases such as respect, openness, empathy, and communication skills. In addition, participants' email exchanges were gathered at the end of the semester. The topics of the exchange varied as participants were only told about the nature of the study not specifics they needed to gather from their pen-pals.

The data analysis for this study was inductive, which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is best defined as "a process for 'making sense' of field data" (p. 202). The raw data gathered through reflections and email exchanges were coded. The codes were then categorized to provide descriptive and inferential information about the context from which the data were obtained thereby, developing theory in the process (Glesne, 2016). Furthermore, each code was compared

to all other codes to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns (Bowen, 2005). These interpretations of the descriptive coding were then used to design pattern-based themes. For example, 12 codes were generated from the data sources: eye-opener (65%), empathy (60%), personal connection/similarities (60%), diversity/respect (60%), desire to learn more (55%); keep an open mind (50%), differences (48%), equity (48%), change mindset (42%), awareness/informed (15%), global mindset (15%), and not to be judgmental (15%). The importance of education and mental health were also mentioned given the circumstance of their pen-pals. Table 1 is the breakdown of the coding categories.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of the Coding Categories

Theme	Code Category	Frequency %
Ethnocentric to ethnorelative	Empathy	60
	Diversity/ respect	60
	Desire to learn more	55
	Equity	48
	Change mindset	42
Expanded worldviews	Eye-opener	65
	Open mind	50
	Differences	48
	Awareness/informed	15
	Global mindset	15
Relationship building	Personal connection/similarities	60
	Not to be judgmental	15

Meanwhile, data from Berardo and Deardorff (2012)'s Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection Survey were analyzed to understand whether this pen-pal project helped American preservice teachers develop intercultural competence. The data from the survey were used to supplement the qualitative data. The overall mean increased from 4.24 to 4.62, while the mean of each item also increased. The most noticeable increase was participants' sociolinguistic awareness, from 3.46 to 4.23.

## Findings and Discussion

This study reveals how preservice teachers' participation in a pen-pal project influenced their intercultural development. At the start of the project, most of the participants indicated they were not aware of, nor did they care about what was happening outside of their immediate surroundings. Moreover, participants' email exchanges started with very general questions such as music, food, traditions, to the very specific questions such as the placement of the refugee children toward the end of the project.

It was obvious the learning curves varied individually. Although not all participants were able to engage in in-depth conversations about pedagogical content knowledge which was being practiced in the different culture/setting, they did realize it was critical to learn about different cultural and social events which were happening, as well as the knowledge of learners toward the end of the semester. Overall, all of the participants were able to make comparisons, find similarities, and differences between the two cultures. The most valuable lesson according to the participants, however, was they learned to be empathic instead of taking things for granted. Three themes emerged from this study which illuminated aspects of participants' pen-pal experiences that which were crucial to their intercultural development and responses to the research questions.



### ***From Ethnocentric to Ethnorelative***

Participants' indifference was quite prevalent in the beginning of the semester. They questioned the value of learning about the country they did not even know. For example, one fifth of the participants stated that, "I do not even know where Turkey is." Their attitudes toward learning about other cultures and education systems were not positive, but they liked the idea of having pen-pals since they never had one in the past.

At the start of the project, participants complained their pen-pals did not respond within a day or two or did not respond immediately. Some even requested to have new pen-pals because the wait was too long for them. It took a while for the participants to start engaging in conversations related to education system, political system, history, and the impact of the refugees in Turkey. The majority of earlier conversations were centered on music, movies, classes, family structure, religious practices, and traditions.

As participants gradually realized how they were fortunate to have the opportunities they did, such as good health and college education in a safe environment. They stopped commenting on their pen-pals' inability to communicate on a weekly basis. Most of the participants started to put themselves in their pen-pals shoes, as well as the refugees'. For example, participants believed that hearing news from their pen-pals made a huge difference in their attitudes and helped them become more culturally sensitive. Ozcelik and Paprika (2010) would consider this development of emotional awareness in the making can be used to describe how participants have transformed their thoughts and attitudes as a result.

Many things have happened in Ankara, Turkey during the study, politically and socially. Several participants were able to relate to what they learned from their pen-pals in their reflections. Learning about what happened in Syria, how the Turkish government tried to support the refugees, and the conditions of the refugee camps from their pen-pals was impactful for the participants to truly develop empathy and global awareness. Many of them stated more countries should be responsible for the chaos in Syria, and also commented they "could be more involved, more educated on this matter, and be informed" (participant number 9). This transformation perfectly illustrates DeStigter's (1999) definition of critical empathy. It is apparent that participants had come to relate to their pen-pals and the world around them cognitively and affectively, and how it could enable the elision of these differences as one individual empathizes with another. Another piece of evidence was when many of the participants stated they have become more patient and considerate because of this pen-pal experience. They noticed that not all of the Turkish participants spoke English fluently, so communication was not easy sometimes. Shifts in the participants' attitudes showed that thinking less of themselves and more of others is a critical component of developing empathy. As Bouton (2016) states, putting oneself in the shoes of another is imperative for a teacher who wants to meet her students' diverse educational needs. The most significant increase in participants' self-reflection was sociolinguistic awareness. This showed that the outcome of the quantitative and qualitative measurements was aligned. Additionally, all participants were impressed by the fact that their pen-pals were multilingual, since they are required to learn two foreign languages in school.

### ***Expanded Worldviews***

It is apparent that participants' understanding of culture as a construct was not well developed prior to the pen-pal experience. They had a habit of seeing the world from their limited worldviews

and lived experiences. Without possessing the knowledge of struggles the pen-pals' country was going through, such as terrorist attacks, and the knowledge of their non-English communication difficulties, many participants complained about their pen-pals being slow or not responding in the beginning of the semester. However, participants increasingly became more culturally sensitive throughout the semester as they learned more about themselves and their pen-pals' lives, their English language proficiency, and what occurred in that region. Participant number 25 gave a great example:

I learned to respect differences among many people because you know someone's personal situation and what that person is going through. I like learning about people's personal culture because it gives me a new perspective about the world and how people are different from us.

By the end of the study, participants had developed more complex cultural constructs. This finding supports previous research that suggests any forms of firsthand intercultural experience can help individuals examine their own cultural identity and recognize cultural differences in themselves and others (e.g., Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Marx & Moss, 2011; Ozelik & Paprika, 2010; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011; Wach & Mickiewicz, 2015).

Participants' worldviews were expanded when they acknowledged and showed gratitude for the opportunity to learn from their pen-pals. One interesting finding was that nearly half of the participants also recognized the fact that their pen-pals were multilingual and wished they were too. "I was surprised to learn that my pen-pal is learning Russian and German besides English now," as stated by participant number 10. The acknowledgment of how learning languages is valued in Turkey definitely shifted the participants' worldviews to some extent. Nevertheless, the information acquired from the conversations with pen-pals was much more than the participants would have learned from a textbook or the U.S. media. Furthermore, many participants indicated that they have learned the importance of listening to different cultural perspectives. This stance aligned with Nganga's (2016) findings that encouraging students to consider different cultural perspectives can be extremely helpful as it helps preservice teachers learn to understand no one culture is superior to others. This is the first step for teachers to understand the importance of working effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Without this expanded worldviews, they may not appreciate and value diversity as it is.

### ***Relationship Building***

Participants' Turkish pen-pals were mostly from Ankara, the capital of Turkey, and nearby areas. Bombings in Ankara occurred several times over the course of the study, as Turkey has been the biggest supporter for refugees from Syria and Iraq. As a result, some of the Turkish pen-pals lost their family members, friends, classmates, or had injured loved ones. These incidents served as springboards for the participants to develop sympathy and realize how different life is in the U.S. The day when one participant brought up the news of a second bombing in Ankara in class, the entire class fell silent. The participants who did not hear from their pen-pals often also indicated an emotional connection with them. For example, participant number 21 expressed, "when I first heard about the bombing (in class), I immediately thought of H (her pen-pal). I was so thankful when I found out she was okay." Participant number 3 also stated that, "Due to a lot of my classmates knowing that this (bombing) affected their pen pals, it was shocking to see the personal connection." In their reflections, some participants related to how they felt when the Boston Marathon bombing happened in the U.S. Participant number 5 remarked,

Now a bombing happens to a culture that isn't known as well, and not nearly as many people knew about it. Everyday these people have to escape from the civil war and watch out for bombings. It changed my views into realizing how much more people need to get educated and care for each other.

Connection was the key for the participants to continue wanting to learn more about their counterparts' culture, schooling, and religious practices. Although participants and their pen-pals did not know each other for a long time, many developed friendships and expressed the desire to continue their communication after the project ended. Participants' connection with their pen-pals helped them much more than learning about the Turkish education system or how much the Turkish government has helped the refugees reestablish their lives. Their connection has also helped participants become open-minded and rethink their role as a teacher. It was found the more positive feelings the participants had toward their pen-pals, the more flexible, involved, and open-minded they became. For example, one Turkish pen-pal even introduced her Syrian refugee friend to participant number 8 to help her better understand about the situation in that region and the challenges the refugees faced on a daily basis. These cross-cultural skills contribute to participants' intercultural competence (Cushner & Mahon, 2009).

It is obvious that personal connection has contributed to participants' development of intercultural competence as suggested by previous research (Smolcic & Arends, 2017; Wach & Mickiewicz, 2015). Building relationships was deemed a critical finding of this study. The connections participants had with their pen-pals not only helped them unpack their preconceived notations and enhance their cross-cultural communication skills, they served as the foundation for change. This foundation for change is the key in building diverse communities which are powerful enough to achieve shared goals.

## **Implications**

As the student population has become more diverse than ever, it is essential for preservice teachers to better equip themselves with the knowledge and skills to work with all children and their families. The findings of this study indicate multicultural dialogues can advance preservice teachers' educational experience, which can be carried over into the future classroom by providing multicultural learning experiences to students. If international pen-pals are not available, preservice teachers do not have to travel far to learn about other cultures. There are many different groups of international students on college campuses across the country. Preservice teachers can become familiar with customs, traditions, values, and norms of different cultural groups on campus. For example, Smolcic and Arends (2017) give hope that intercultural learning at a college campus can occur through a "structured course-based interaction that involves conceptual learning about culture in combination with personal interaction to locate those concepts within the routines and daily lives of individuals" (p. 69). By cultivating a respect for cultural diversity, preservice teachers are more likely to be accepting. Greater acceptance leads to greater tolerance of students of different cultures. Furthermore, Cushner and Mahon (2009) argue that a cognitive only approach will not help preservice teachers develop intercultural sensitivity and competence. They propose that the experience and affective domain ought to be considered along with cognition to help preservice teachers develop intercultural competence. Therefore, experiences and activities which challenge preservice teachers' frame of reference and help them gain knowledge about other people should be embedded in teacher education preparation. Some of the experiences that can be integrated easily are role-play, case studies, current events, field trips, service-learning as well as studying abroad. International student teaching, as suggested by Chacko and Lin (2015), is another impactful experience which really encourages preservice teachers to immerse themselves in a

cultural context outside of their own. However, teacher educators need to be cautious since immersion experiences alone are not sufficient to improve preservice teachers' intercultural development. Cultural reflection should be in place simultaneously (Chacko & Lin, 2015; Marx & Moss, 2011). Findings of this study shed light on how to embed global issues in curriculum. In turn, a proposed structure of intercultural experiences in teacher education is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Structure of intercultural experience in teacher education

As Nganga (2016) postulates, teacher knowledge of diverse cultures is essential. Educators also need to model and encourage learners to consider different cultural perspectives. "Indeed, educators must always be ready to see themselves not just as teachers, but also as agents of social change" (p. 94). Nevertheless, the need to provide intercultural experiences in the teacher education programs is evident. There is no better time than now to reconceptualize teacher education to include international or intercultural experiences. Preservice teachers should actively reflect on global issues and gain intercultural competence, if not become multilingual. Further, it is essential that policy makers at the state level require teacher education programs within each state to undergo a program redesign to include intercultural co-curricular and extra-curricular learning activities in teacher preparation.

### Limitations

It should be acknowledged that this study has a few limitations. First, the findings of this study are not generalizable. Intercultural competence and development need to acknowledge the external factors which influence participants' attitudes and thinking transformations, which were not addressed or identified in this study. Furthermore, participants were not given guided questions to communicate with their pen-pals. The results may differ for this study if the interactions were more guided or controlled. Lastly, the study took place in a semester-long multicultural education course. If this study were carried out in a methods or general education course, the outcome might be different, given that the context would be different.

Despite these limitations, participants' improvement in their knowledge of different cultures and global issues were inspiring. The pen-pal project not only stimulated preservice teachers' reflectivity, but also brought out their potential to develop intercultural skills which help them to communicate more effectively. The impact of intercultural dialogue has potential to impact classroom practice, and teaching and learning to help preservice teachers develop intercultural competence. Hence, future directions for teacher education should place intercultural competence at the foundation of a redesign for courses. This may broaden preservice teachers' understanding and ability to think in culturally different ways.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the experience of intercultural dialogue has the potential to influence classroom teaching and learning. It may also help preservice teachers develop

intercultural competence. Leasky (2015) believes good teaching across cultures engages meaningful intercultural dialogue and the findings of this study prove just that. Many participants developed intercultural competence by reflecting on their own cultural backgrounds, gathering information about their pen-pals' cultures, understanding differences and similarities of the cultures, showing empathy, and developing appropriate teaching strategies. Even though not all participants recognized the fact that teaching and learning were greatly affected by the interplay of politics, societal norms, and cultural values, many of them were able to reflect on their own values and identities, and begin to acknowledge differences in economic, political, social, and cultural positions.

Cushner and Mahon (2009) argue educators should avoid marginalizing the international context when it comes to teacher preparation. They believe valuable curricular and pedagogical practices which international teachers prepare on international worldviews can be critical for intercultural development. Participants in this study believe they have learned great information about the Turkish education system, while also learning about how languages are taught in Turkey. This includes how learning different languages is valued in a different culture. Further, they have learned to appreciate how critical it is to provide a good education to all children. As suggested by participant number 20, "It is important that if I have Muslim children in my class, they will be treated with respect and other children do not make false assumptions about them. I am going to make sure that every child feels comfortable and welcomed."

Most importantly, as teacher educators are trying to better prepare preservice teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) discuss that the values each preservice teacher brings to the dialogue should be recognized. Preservice teachers should be engaged in *internalized dialogue* (Lin et al., 2008) and building awareness of their own frames of reference, and "take on the challenge of confronting difficult discussions on positionality in examining its relationship to one's learning process of constructing and revising one's perspective of both self and other" (p. 1149). As classrooms around the world become more culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, it is critical teacher educators work purposefully toward developing coherent learning experiences (Pilonieta et al., 2017; Smolcic & Katunich, 2017) which help preservice teachers learn to be interculturally aware, develop critical empathy, and acknowledge differences in economic, political, social, and cultural positions.

To conclude, Moloney and Saltmarsh (2016) remind us of our responsibility as teacher educators: "To provide a dynamic and individually stimulating educational experience with the development of new strategies to build critical enquiry and to stimulate individual responsibility for social justice in education" (p. 88). All learners deserve a good education regardless of their backgrounds; they also deserve effective teachers who value the diversity which they bring to classrooms. This reminder is timely as we see how politics influences how young children learn in the U.S. and abroad currently. Many teacher educators across the globe are creating more opportunities for intercultural learning across the curriculum in teacher preparation. To be able to reflect then becomes crucial. It is therefore essential for teacher educators to examine their own cultures and values, and considering how their beliefs system influences their teaching practice and decision-making in relation to the selection of content and learning activities which, in turn, will impact preservice teachers' attitudes toward teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Leasky, 2015).

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