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Elementary School Placements Worldwide: Austrian Student Teachers Engage with Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Through Hands-on Experience

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In line with the Higher Education Mobility and Internationalization Strategy 2020-2030 of the Austrian Ministry of Education, the Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg (PHV), a university college of teacher education, has initiated the project Elementary school placements worldwide. The project gives students the opportunity to develop intercultural competences and teaching expertise through encounters with school systems and people from around the globe. The PHV thus responds to the demands of a globalized world with schools that reflect society and exhibit a high degree of cultural and linguistic diversity. The PHV has collaborated successfully with the Beit Berl College Laboratory School in Israel and the One World Foundation Free Education School in Sri Lanka. Student teachers report on the special experiences they have had and how much it has positively changed their skills and also their attitudes as teachers. At the same time, PHV faculty members who have served as mentors say the experience has broadened their horizons regarding teacher education, schools, and teaching practices worldwide. This article describes both collaborations and outlines a successful (research) project that was implemented and evaluated in Israel during the summer semester of 2022. As an outlook, the project School from the Perspective of the Global North and South - Practical Experiences is presented, with which the PHV will expand and further develop global teaching practice. The elementary school placements are cofounded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ Programme, Learning Mobility for Individuals.

Schlagworte: elementary school placements worldwide; global teaching practice

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Elementary School Placements Worldwide: Austrian Student Teachers Engage with Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Through Hands-on Experience

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Abstract

In line with the *Higher Education Mobility and Internationalization Strategy 2020–2030* of the Austrian Ministry of Education, the Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg (PHV), a university college of teacher education, has initiated the project *Elementary school placements worldwide*. The project gives students the opportunity to develop intercultural competences and teaching expertise through encounters with school systems and people from around the globe. The PHV thus responds to the demands of a globalized world with schools that reflect society and exhibit a high degree of cultural and linguistic diversity. The PHV has collaborated successfully with the Beit Berl College Laboratory School in Israel and the One World Foundation Free Education School in Sri Lanka. Student teachers report on the special experiences they have had and how much it has positively changed their skills and also their attitudes as teachers. At the same time, PHV faculty members who have served as mentors say the experience has broadened their horizons regarding teacher education, schools, and teaching practices worldwide. This article describes both collaborations and outlines a successful (research) project that was implemented and evaluated in Israel during the summer semester of 2022. As an outlook, the project *School from the Perspective of the Global North and South – Practical Experiences* is presented, with which the PHV will expand and further develop global teaching practice. The elementary school placements are co-funded by the European Commission's *Erasmus+ Programme, Learning Mobility for Individuals*.

Keywords: elementary school placements worldwide, global teaching practice

Outline

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1 Elementary School Placements Worldwide

In Austria, student teaching in schools is an integral part of the bachelor's program for elementary school teachers. The bachelor's program lasts eight semesters. After that, students can already be taken on in the school service and complete the master's program in two years part-time instead of one year full-time. Beginning in the 5th semester, student teachers complete a four-week teaching practice each semester as part of their studies and at the same time choose a focus area. In the 7th and 8th semesters, the student teaching practice must be focus-specific and project-oriented. Depending on the focus area, it may also take place abroad. Hence, student teachers can apply for a school placement at the partner school in Israel or Sri Lanka. Starting in the 2024/25 academic year, the project will be expanded to include partner schools in Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, and Brazil. During the global teaching practice, PHV faculty members monitor students both online, providing feedback to lesson planning and commenting reflections on teaching, and on-site through classroom observations. The project aims to develop the student teachers' language awareness, language learning awareness, and general pedagogical, social, and transcultural (communicative) competences. For their future profession as teachers, it is essential to be able to consider the heterogeneity resulting from the wide variety of cultures and languages to which they are exposed when working with children and their parents. The two examples described here were carried out within the framework of the focus area *Panlinguistic Pedagogy in Primary Education* (Bellet, 2022). It is characterized by a combination of modules in the field of language awareness with all its cognitive, emotional and social dimensions as well as language learning awareness and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

2 School Placement: Beit Berl Lab School, Israel

The PHV has collaborated with the Beit Berl College in Kfar Saba, Israel in various joint teaching projects, including online (Bellet, Ilg, Zeppetbauer, 2021) for several years. Part of this collaboration is the exchange of student teachers to and from Israel. In the winter semester of 2022, two PHV students completed a four-week school placement at the Laboratory School of Beit Berl College. As part of their school placement, they developed a so-called *Mehrsprachiges Lesetheater* (MELT, Multilingual Reader's Theater) and implemented it as a school practice project with a class of Israeli fifth graders. The MELT method is an innovative, cross-linguistic, and cross-curricular phonetic reading method to promote reading fluency and reading motivation in the languages taught in schools (Kutzelmann, Massler, Hendel, 2017). The core of MELT is a multilingual dramatized read-aloud text based on a narrative in which the languages promoted at school (language of instruction and foreign languages) appear simultaneously. In addition, migrant languages (children's family languages such as e. g. Russian) can be included. In MELT classes, students work in groups and rehearse a scene

from the play, with the goal of being able to read it aloud fluently and expressively in several languages. The use of different languages promotes an aspect of language awareness, namely appreciation and openness to other languages, a goal that has often been excluded in foreign language teaching in the past (Hallet, 2015). The school practice project was monitored by PHV faculty members and evaluated immediately after the completion of the nine teaching units by means of questionnaires for both the student teachers carrying out the project and the students. In addition, the student teachers continuously recorded their personal reflections on the individual process steps throughout the project, which were also evaluated (Ilg & Bellet, 2023). It could be shown that the school practice project MELT described here was successful in several respects. Positive effects can be reported for the student teachers who carried out the project, for the participating 5th graders and for the partner institutions. The student teachers were introduced to an action-oriented (Germain-Rutherford, 2021) and innovative teaching method that uses stories to connect with the children's world and enables authentic and cooperative language learning. During the implementation of the project, they were forced to react flexibly to the challenges posed by the linguistically and culturally diverse setting, and they did so successfully. As a result of the school practice project, they were able to enhance their pedagogical, linguistic, and teaching competencies. Finally, it should be emphasized that collaborations such as this one with partner universities around the world can contribute to the internationalization of teaching and research at both institutions. Not only for the student teachers, but also for the participating faculty members, the school practice project described here provided an opportunity for a change of perspective and for the expansion of intercultural and professional competences (see also Redecker, 2024, in this anthology).

3 School Placement: Free Education School, Sri Lanka

For the past six years, up to six student teachers per year have completed a four-week school placement at the Free Education School in Sri Lanka. Together with the Ayurveda Guesthouse & Resort and the Art and Literature Program, the school forms the three pillars of the One World Foundation, which supports educational projects in Sri Lanka. The school is located in the small rural town of Ahungalla on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka and provides free education to local families for their children (free education is not yet available to all) as well as vocational training to adults. Especially in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for students between the ages of 6 and 18, the school needs well-trained teachers who can also support the local classroom teachers in a train-the-trainer approach. Developing communication skills is a primary objective for young learners. This is essential for their future career goals in the emerging, internationally focused state of Sri Lanka and aligns with the Sri Lankan government's *General Education Sector Development Plan* (2020, p. 24). However, students often lack adequate role models for practicing proper English pronunciation. Most elementary school teachers are not fully qualified to teach English, which can result in

limited vocabulary and incorrect pronunciation that hinder children's progress in learning English (Indrarathne & McCulloch, 2022). The main objective of the school placements therefore is to improve the English language proficiency of both the students and teachers. Cultural exchange and innovative teaching methods with motivating, action-oriented units are necessary for achieving this goal, and the school provides numerous opportunities for a variety of teaching activities. These help PHV student teachers to enhance their teaching skills while developing a global mindset. The following two quotes extracted from students' reflective papers after their school placement provide a glimpse into some of their learning outcomes:

"All in all, we left the Free Education School with a suitcase full of positive impressions, wonderful experiences, warm encounters and confidence in our own qualifications as teachers". (Annalena, 2020)

"The experience we had with the language barrier showed us the problems caused by communication difficulties and made us aware of how difficult it is for speakers of migrant languages when they do not speak the language of the majority". (Sophia, 2022)

4 School From the Perspective of the Global North and South

As mentioned above, an important part of PHV's internationalization strategy is to expand global teaching practice to allow more student teachers to complete their student teaching in the Global South (beyond Sri Lanka). To this end, PHV will expand its school placements to Sub-Saharan-Africa and South America and, starting in the academic year 2023/24, will establish school placements with schools in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and Brazil. At the same time, existing collaborations with Israel, the United States and Taiwan will continue. The project *School from the Perspective of the Global North and South – Practical Experiences* aims to sensitize student teachers to the differences between education in Austria, Israel, the U.S, and Taiwan compared to Sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil, and Sri Lanka. Among other things (e. g. culturally conditioned value of education) they should be able to recognize how different financial resources affect educational opportunities and equity. The results will then be reflected, discussed and scientifically treated in the above-mentioned focus area courses with the student teachers at home.

The project was developed during the *Africa UniNet* and *Erasmus+ Cooperation Seminar* in Kenya in October 2022 and discussed with representatives from universities in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda. Subsequently, the concept was reviewed with the respective universities via video conference and was positively evaluated by all partners. It was agreed that starting in the academic year 2023/24, students will be able to complete a four-week school placement at the other partners' laboratory schools. After the successful agreement, a university in South America was sought that would also train student teachers and support the demand for educational equity. The Universidade Fed-

eral Fluminense (UFF) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil meets these criteria and trains teachers who will work not only in private schools, but also in public schools. The Brazilian school system is characterized by great inequality. While graduates of private schools perform comparably to students from the Global North, public schools lack both financial and human resources. For example, English is not taught in public schools. Yet English language skills are important for integration into the labor market. Schools in the catchment areas of favelas (Brazilian slums) pose a particular challenge. Students often attend school only for the free lunch and leave immediately after. The UFF sends its student teachers to two of these schools for after-school activities to keep the students in school longer and give them a perspective outside the favelas. This is where the global teaching practice project comes in, and the PHV, in collaboration with the UFF, sends student teachers to these schools for a school placement. The student teachers assist the teachers during the morning classes and team teach short sport or art classes in English with the Brazilian student teachers in the afternoon. In this way, the children learn English through the *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)* approach, a very successful method in foreign language teaching.

In addition to the PHV's student teachers doing their student teaching in Africa and Brazil, this project will also bring student teachers and faculty from Africa and Brazil to Austria. Students who, for various reasons, are not able to do their student teaching abroad will be able to interact with their colleagues from Africa and Brazil through team teaching in the PHV's laboratory school and by attending courses together.

5 Conclusion

Three of PHV's global school practice projects were presented with the aim of preparing student teachers for the 21st century. The collaboration with Beit Berl College enables student teachers to develop their professional and personal skills for teaching in today's multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Israel, historically characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity, is an ideal place for student teachers to try out and evaluate multilingual teaching methods in an authentic school setting. The school practice project at the Free Education School in Sri Lanka sensitizes students to the divergent value of education in today's globalized world and makes them aware that free access to education cannot be taken for granted. Finally, the project *School from the Perspective of the Global North and South – Practical Experiences* presented as an outlook takes up the above-mentioned themes and extends the possibilities of school practice to the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and Brazil. By working together in diverse school settings, student teachers, teachers, and university faculty from around the world can learn from each other and broaden their perspectives on education in the context of cultural and linguistic diversity.

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