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This dissertation concerns the experiences of international teachers working in North Carolina public schools. As I began exploring this unique population's literature, I realized my limited knowledge about their personal and pedagogical acclimation to American schools. School districts across the nation struggle to locate, recruit, and retain highly-qualified teaching candidates to fill vacancies and provide a first-class education to an increasingly diverse student population in schools with specially designed initiatives, such as language immersion and global education. In response to the need for teachers, some districts are recruiting international educators to fill these roles.

I examined three international teachers recruited to fill such positions in this study. These educators openly shared their personal and professional experiences while teaching in North Carolina public schools. I used portraiture as the methodology for this research study. Portraiture is a narrative form of qualitative research. To collect data for this study, I conducted a series of interviews with three female international educators who work in public schools. Portraits require rich-detailed descriptions gathered by listening, observing, and interacting with individuals over time. Thus, in this study, I explored their challenges and perceptions of support while acclimating to their new school setting, then I researched how they overcame the difficulties they faced.

THE JOURNEYS OF THREE INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS
WORKING IN NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving parents, Rommie and Carol Smith.

To my Daddy who taught me to be strong and always cheered for me. I am forever grateful. Daddy was able to celebrate the day I successfully defended my dissertation with me. He peacefully passed into eternity three days later.

I love you more.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about the experiences of international teachers. As I began exploring this unique population's literature, I realized my limited knowledge about their personal and pedagogical acclimation in American schools. However, I have worked with educators who migrate for personal and professional reasons throughout my career. Even though I have served as a leader in a school that hires many international teachers, the limit of my knowledge became evident as I collected pilot data for this study, including an interview with one of my teachers, whom I refer to by the pseudonym Jasmine. I share her story to introduce this topic and set the context for my qualitative dissertation on international teachers' experiences working in American public schools in North Carolina.

Jasmine's Story

One September afternoon, I had an observation post-conference on the schedule, a routine occurrence as part of my job as Assistant Principal. I was looking forward to the meeting and reviewing the observation with Jasmine, one of my international teachers, new to my school. Jasmine is from Jamaica and had joined my staff a little more than a month prior. Upon her arrival, she appeared bubbly, energetic, happy, and according to her coworkers, a team player. Jasmine seemed to be the picture of contentment and was excited to learn about life in the United States, but she was still learning about the school community and living in a new place. She attended voluntary staff social events to mingle and meet new and experienced members of our learning team. She became a part of our school family quickly.

For teachers new to any school, conferencing with an administrator can be an unsettling experience. Despite being highly qualified to teach in their own country and typically experiencing pleasant pre-conference interactions, they are uncertain about the potential

feedback about their performance in the classroom. As I have conducted numerous conferences with teachers in my career, I am ready and prepared for the meeting: notes in hand, appraisal/evaluation instrument, and suggestions for moving forward. I was unprepared for the teacher to enter the office, close the door, and burst into tears.

She sobbed, “I want to go home!”

I immediately said, “If you do not feel well, we can reschedule, no problem.” Jasmine softly wept and nervously rocked in her chair, “No, I want to go home to my family ... I miss my family, friends, and my home. I made a mistake. I want to go home.” I pushed everything aside and just listened. Tears were streaming down her face. She talked about how she missed the smells and the flavors of her country, the taste of the redfish, and her mother’s cooking, things she could not find in rural North Carolina. She missed day trips to the Blue Hole, a favorite site she loved to visit at home. She talked about the many meetings and people different from her hometown in Kingston.

As an elementary school administrator, I am accustomed to meeting with teachers daily about various issues, but I did not expect this. Even though I work in a global school with a dual language program, no one has ever expressed such frustration or discontent. How was I going to help her? Listening was essential, but I needed a way to respond. Unfortunately, I could not take away her anxiety or distress, but I could help. I explained that she could not leave immediately to return home. However, I asked if she could commit to finishing the quarter about a month away. She said she could, but she expressed remorse and felt like a disappointment to school leadership and her team members. Jasmine said she felt confused and overwhelmed about the school’s number of meetings and believed she could not keep up with many expectations, schedules, and

parents. I assured her I would help her navigate the upcoming challenges over the next few weeks.

During those weeks, I checked on her regularly. Day-to-day, I would drop off tips and reminders about things I thought would help her feel comfortable, less distressed, and prepared. I found redfish at a local fishmonger and talked to her about places she could visit to maximize her visit. Jasmine shared stories about her life and schools in Jamaica, about how her school days would begin between five and six o'clock in the morning, where she instructed fourth-grade students in "early school." Early school is an opportunity for students to receive extra help for a fee, hoping to score well on their National Exam. The National Exam in Jamaica is similar to the state exams in North Carolina after the term ends; however, it has added importance. It can affect placement at select schools based on scores. She talked about what drew her into teaching and how she looked into teaching in the states. She explained that she was a part of a teacher preparation program at a prestigious high school that valued preparing students to teach in local communities across the island province.

Jasmine explained that students in Jamaica must score high enough to secure a slot in prestigious high schools. Prestigious schools are usually segregated by gender and provide students with a pathway to start a career or enter a university. Therefore, parents and students will dedicate time and money to schools to help their children score as high as possible. Jasmine said, "Schools pursue teachers with a history of high-test scores. Skilled educators are in high demand to teach in prestigious schools. They are highly compensated for their success when producing students with high test scores." She explained that schools in Jamaica earn additional prestige based on the number of years they have been in operation. She stated, "These schools, which have been running for at least 100 years, are more prestigious and typically have a better

reputation. Most graduates of prestigious schools tend to excel in my home country and travel abroad. Reputation is essential.” Jasmine noted, “Parents appreciate and trust teachers in Jamaica. They are given respect and paid for extra duties.” She explained that teachers and students “work and live in tight-knit communities.”

Jasmine decided to learn about the world beyond her community when she chose to apply to teach in the U.S. She stated, “I do not want to just read about the world. I want to see the world. I want to share what I have seen with the children of my community in Jamaica and inspire someone else to explore the world.” She noted that recently there have been concerns that talented educators are leaving Jamaica to teach in other parts of the world. This exodus of teachers affects the number of highly qualified educators remaining on the island. Still, there is an undeniable allure to migrate to teach in other countries.

After our conversation, she ventured out, explored the world beyond her apartment, and saw places beyond the school. When the end of the quarter arrived, we met again, and she admitted she did feel better but still wanted to go home. I explained the quarter was over, and she could begin the process if she wanted to leave. However, if she could make it to the winter holiday break, the transition home would be easier for her and her class. She agreed to stay until winter. She felt like she would be able to teach until then. She was traveling some and visiting friends in New York. Upon returning from the winter holiday, she came to see me. She enjoyed her time away but was ready to return to her class and wanted me to know she intended to stay for the remainder of the year.

Fast forward five years, she has grown tremendously as a professional. Overcoming her struggles has strengthened her as an individual and global educator. She received a nomination for International Teacher of the Year from her recruiting organization. Jasmine continues to

support the international teaching community. She serves as a mentor to other international educators adjusting to life in North Carolina. She educates others by sharing her experiences as an international teacher during school and community events. After five years, her work visa has expired, despite an attempt to remain for another year. It is now time for her to return home, to her family and the flavors of Jamaica.

Jasmine's story had a happy ending. Our school community will miss her creativity, dedication to her craft, and bubbly personality. Working with Jasmine reminds me that we do not always know how people feel. Even when they seem well adjusted and content, sometimes it is just a facade. This experience is may be especially true for international teachers who may confront culture shock that may not be obvious or easy to see on the surface.

Statement of the Problem

Scholars have made significant contributions to teacher retention and recruitment studies in the United States. However, many school districts across the nation struggle to locate, recruit, and retain highly-qualified teaching candidates as districts attempt to fill vacancies, provide high-quality education for an increasingly diverse student population, and teach students about the world around them. Despite recruiting efforts, rural and urban schools struggle to staff positions in traditional subjects and specially designed programs. Some of these specialized programs include language immersion and promote global education. Many districts across the nation have turned to alternative programs that support students in obtaining 21st-century skills by hiring international educators to fill the numerous vacancies. These vacancies require individuals with specific skills or qualities to meet unique staffing requirements and provide a global perspective. "This requires the best teachers from around the world, bringing their rich personal experiences from other cultures to America's classrooms" (Dunn, 2011, p. 1380). In

this study, I use “international educators” to refer to teachers who migrate to teach in American schools. I use other terms interchangeably: a teacher from abroad, overseas educator, foreign-born teacher, and “internationally mobile educational professional” (Bense, 2016, p. 37).

Despite creative recruiting efforts, school districts struggle to find high-quality teaching candidates, especially in urban and rural areas and specific programs. For example, specially designed programs are present in many schools that promote global education, foreign language immersion, and bilingual education. Recruiting the most highly qualified educators is essential to the success of these programs. These programs often have many vacancies that require specific skills or qualities to meet the unique staffing requirements within their educational institutions. Despite the research, filling teaching vacancies continues to be challenging across many school districts in North Carolina and the nation. Many school districts operate without an approved state budget, limited resources, and a complex curriculum. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic drastically impacted the way schools look and operate on a day-to-day basis. This challenge is not specific to North Carolina schools; however, it has had a global impact on the availability of educators. Two years later, in 2022, things have not returned to *normal*, and districts continue to be short-staffed and are challenged to meet the complex needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Educators need to address culturally responsive education, multicultural awareness, and equity for all learners.

Some districts have chosen to hire international teachers to help meet students’ instructional needs considering current teacher shortages and the scarcity of educators who possess specific skill sets. “As urban school districts realized that financial incentives, alternative certification, and US-based recruitment programs did not fill teacher vacancies, many turned to recruit teachers from abroad” (Dunn, 2011, p. 1381). In some cases, districts have chosen to hire

teachers from abroad to share their cultural experiences and language. Research has shown that teachers' supply has not kept up with the demand or need for teachers trained to support students in language immersion programs (Sutcher et al., 2016). Teacher migration is not a new trend in the United States. However, this trend of hiring international educators has not sparked as much attention as that of other professionals such as healthcare workers, hospitality workers, or employees working in other public institutions; nonetheless, the trend toward hiring overseas trained workers is growing (AFT, 2009; Goldstein, 2018). The recruitment of foreign-born educators is not a new practice. Still, there is limited current research about international teachers' perspectives and experiences working in public elementary schools in language immersion settings or global schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of international teachers hired to teach in urban areas in North Carolina. I am interested in what brings these teachers to the United States, how they experienced their transition and acclimation to their new setting, the challenges and support they receive, and international teachers' contributions to schools. By studying international teachers, educational leaders can better understand their challenges and how to respond to them. Additionally, this study's results can help inform school districts and administrators about ways to support international teachers working in American schools. There are no recent studies concerning the experiences of educators who migrate to teach and their assimilation into schools within the past ten years. My goal is to expand the current but limited research and include the narratives of internationally trained teachers working in global schools or dual language/immersion settings.

Research Question

The central research question I have for this study emerged from the lack of recent studies about foreign-born teachers' experiences working in American classrooms. The primary research question is as follows: What are international teachers' experiences working in North Carolina public schools? I am particularly interested in international educators' experiences and perspectives related to schools, acclimation into their new communities, and culture shock.

Background Context

Hiring international teachers in schools is not a new phenomenon. Teachers have been traveling around the world for centuries. After World War II, the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act, commonly known as the Fulbright Act 1946, was signed (Snow, 1998, p. 619). According to the United States Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs website (2022), "the purpose of the act is to increase mutual understanding between the citizens of other nations and the United States while promoting an understanding of diverse cultures and places." The international community forms alliances through this partnership, where educators can participate in organized visits to share their culture and languages (<https://eca.state.gov>).

The U.S. Congress approved The International Cultural Exchange and Fair Participation in 1965.

The purpose of this act is to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and the contributions made by the United States economic and social system toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for its people and other people throughout the world; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful

relations between the United States and the other countries of the world. (U.S. Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, 2022)

Educators started seeking opportunities to teach and study abroad to accomplish the International Cultural Exchange Act's goals and strengthen the relationships between the individual nations. Traveling to unfamiliar places, these sojourners shared their knowledge of their culture with others. Ten years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson emphasized the importance of international exchange programs and international education. He stated, "International education is the responsibility and promise of all nations. It calls for free exchange and full collaboration. We expect to receive as much as we give, to learn as well as to teach" (The American Presidency Project Website, 2022).

The mission statement of the United States Department of Education is "to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (USDOE Website, 2022). The United States continues to be a diverse nation composed of citizens who ideally seek to become more inclusive and understanding of others. However, among many, there is currently an elevated level of xenophobia, fear, and lack of knowledge and understanding of individuals who are different. According to a report published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2017), university officials participated in interviews and surveys to gather their perspectives affecting the current tense U.S. political climate. There are increased concerns about recruiting and retaining students from other countries, causing colleges and university officials to rethink how they attract and support this population of students.

Eighty-one percent of the respondents say their current international students are slightly, moderately, or greatly concerned about the U.S.'s political developments. They

are particularly uneasy, higher-education experts say, about the Trump administration's controversial immigration policies, including a proposed wall along the border with Mexico, efforts to deport undocumented residents, calls for stricter vetting for visas, and two attempts to push through travel bans. (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2017, p. 1)

Although travel bans are legal, based on the survey information, it appears the bans target individuals from particular countries such as China, India, and nations that practice the Muslim religion, causing anxiety and concerns for students, educators, and visitors from all over the world (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). These bans create an inhospitable and even stressful environment for individuals navigating new situations in the nation's schools and college campuses. Current immigration policies have contributed to increased xenophobia. These policies were created by the previous presidential administration and exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Trump administration blamed the Chinese population for spreading the virus and scrutinized programs that recruit and attract foreign individuals such as educators, students, and workers (Apoorvaa, 2020, p. 5). According to the United Nations Press Release by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, "the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering;" he urged governments to "act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate" (<https://www.un.org>).

The recent pandemic has caused U.S. visa issuance policies, an already complicated process for foreign-born teachers and university students who wish to enter the U.S. for educational purposes, to become more arduous. On June 22, 2020, the President issued the *Proclamation Suspending Entry of Aliens Who Present a Risk to the U.S. Labor Market Following the Coronavirus Outbreak*, which stated that Effective June 24, 2020, it placed restrictions and suspended individuals who are seeking H-1B, H-2B, and J-1 visas for

educational purposes (whitehouse.gov, 2020). This policy is currently blocking educators, students, and other individuals from entering the U.S., having a ripple effect on public schools and higher learning institutions that rely on them to meet critical staffing needs. These policies will inevitably have educational and financial implications. The visas required to work in U.S. schools are complicated and stressful for educators seeking them.

The Process of Hiring International Teachers

In 2009, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) researched and documented the process and practice of hiring international educators. As described in the document “Importing Educators: Causes and Consequences of International Teacher Recruitment,” the authors examined a ten-year trend of recruiting international educators to teach in American schools. According to the American Federation of Teachers (2009), a decade ago, “16,975 overseas-trained teachers were working in the U.S. on H-1B and J-1 visas” (p. 10). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), 3.2 million teachers are currently working in the United States (NCES, 2022). The J-1 visa allows individuals as part of a cultural exchange program to share their knowledge of their culture. The H-1B visa grants individuals with specific skills or unique occupations which employers are looking for, such as language or other occupational skills, to migrate to other locations (AFT, 2011).

It is challenging to locate an accurate number of international educators and educational professionals, students who are granted J-1 and HB-1 visas, or other non-immigrant work visas issued by the United States Department of State (Bense, 2019). Documenting the migration of individuals related to education is a challenging task, according to Caravati, Lederer, Lupico, and Van Meter (2014):

Different government agencies, educational institutions, and research organizations collect information on migration, occupation, and education using multiple surveys and censuses. They use different definitions and classification methods and cover different periods so that the data is rarely compatible within a particular country, let alone internationally comparable. Moreover, government agencies that collect migration information rarely desegregate data by occupations. (p. 18)

Educators eligible to teach in the United States must apply for a J-1 or H-1B visa. These visas allow international educators to remain in the U.S. for three years. Some educators can request an additional two years, but there are no precise records of how long educators from abroad remain in the United States. We also do not track how many international teachers stay beyond their initial agreement or if they leave their teaching position prematurely, returning to their native country. In recent developments, individuals who enter the United States on J-1 or H-1B visas are allowed to stay an additional year making the potential length of stay six years.

Districts Hire International Teachers

Districts seek an assortment of qualified, effective teachers who bring a rich and diverse wealth of knowledge to schools. While many teachers in the United States can fit this description, school districts recruit international teachers to share their culture, provide authentic language examples, and offer dual language immersion students a global perspective.

According to the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI, 2022) website, dual language-immersion programs began in North Carolina in 1990. There are currently 200 programs in 47 districts in eight languages (www.ncdpi.gov). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) stated in a 2015 report called *Dual Language Education Programs: Current State Policies and Practices*, “Dual language education programs

are a type of bilingual education program in which students learn literacy and academic content in English and a partner language” (www.ncela.ed.gov, p. 4). Dual language programs aim to develop students with high language and literacy proficiency who understand multiple cultures. Dual-language and immersion programs (DL/I) are growing in popularity in American schools. According to Gross (2016), “there were an estimated 260 dual-language programs in the U.S. in 2000 and 1,000 in 2005” (p. 2). The USDOE does not provide an exact number of DL/I programs currently operating in American schools. Over 2,000 school programs exist in the United States, resulting from the growing popularity of global and immersion schools. According to the Office of Language Acquisition (2016), dual language-immersion programs teach eighteen languages, with Spanish and Chinese as the most commonly taught world languages (p. 1).

Hiring international teachers helps bring a global perspective to students by enriching the standards through their experiences. Educators understand that the world has become increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Barkatsas and Bertram (2016) write that “It is undeniable that our global societies are advancing rapidly toward a more integrated and connected world and in this century faster than ever before ... international educators help support schools move toward that goal” (p. 1). In elementary schools, educators provide students with lessons that develop critical thinking skills that integrate global knowledge and understanding into the curriculum and instruction. Ideally, these learning opportunities purposely infuse global competencies into lessons.

Globally responsible individuals know and understand other places and cultures beyond their own. Global citizens understand the similarities and differences of cultures and respect the variation among people. Developing global competence is essential in elementary schools because students are members of an interconnected and interdependent society extending beyond

the community where they reside. Primary school educators have a critical role in preparing students for the 21st century, which requires all individuals to be prepared to participate in an increasingly interconnected world.

Global education is an approach toward teaching and learning that supports students with skills to help them live in an increasingly interconnected and diverse society. In 2011, the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE) organized the Global Education Task Force to assess the state's efforts and ability "to produce globally competitive graduates ready to live, work, and contribute to an interconnected world" (p. 4). The investigation led to the NCDPI Taskforce Report (2013), which contained recommendations to ensure school districts prepare to support teachers, students, and parents. California, Arizona, Florida, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Texas have similar global education plans.

The North Carolina Global Education task force's recommendations include developing structures to ensure success, such as learning about global competencies and being a global citizen. The plan includes suggestions for expanding dual-language programs, global education programs, and international relationships. Dual language programs incorporate the instruction of two languages in the learning environment. The plan includes information from the P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning (known as Battelle for Kids, a non-profit organization), initially started in 2002. The P21 Framework (2016) "was developed with input from educators, education experts, and business leaders to define and illustrate the skills, knowledge, expertise, and support systems that students need to succeed in work, life, and citizenship" (p. 1).

According to Parkerhouse, Tichnor-Wagner, Cain, and Glazier (2016), "Many in education emphasize that the increasing cultural and national diversity inside our schools requires both students and teachers to acquire new skills including intercultural competence and global

awareness” (p. 267). Global education programs focus on teaching students about the world beyond their classroom and the impact individuals can have on the world around them when they are open-minded about people from other cultures and places. The new policy at both the federal (USDOE) and state (NCDPI) levels, as well as in the mission statements of global non-profit organizations, such as P21, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Asia Society, all reflect policy related to global education (Parkerhouse et al., 2016).

The U.S. Department of Education’s mission statement is “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (USDOE Website, 2020). To align with this national mission and effectively implement structures that promote these values, the NCDPI developed a framework for schools to use to infuse global competencies in the K-12 school setting, including expanding dual language and global programs.

Using the framework developed by NCDPI, schools and districts focus on embedding global competencies in the curriculum in order to prepare all students for success in an interconnected world ready for the 21st century (NCDPI, 2013; OECD, 2018; P21, 2020). After implementing a global curriculum, the subsequent development was the emergence of global schools. There is a heightened focus on teaching global competencies in these schools and embedding them into everyday instruction by integrating content areas.

International teachers can infuse lessons with the varied perspectives from their native lands. Global competencies are a part of the P21 framework. The framework is part of a K-12 skill set that prepares students to become problem solvers, ready to engage in a diverse society with respect and understanding as global citizens, and includes the 4Cs of critical thinking,

communication, collaboration, and creativity (OECD, 2018; NCDPI, 2011; battelleforkids.org, 2020). Globally competent students understand how to investigate the world around them and collaboratively problem-solve to improve the world around them. Educators support students by modeling ways to communicate verbally and through technology with individuals from other places (OECD, 2018; NCDPI, 2011). Through instruction, international educators share their knowledge and understanding of how they can facilitate positive change.

Overview of Methodology

I will use portraiture as the methodology for this research study on international teachers' experiences in U.S. schools. Portraiture is a narrative form of qualitative research in which researchers search for what is good about participants. Researchers using this method create portraits of participants that are "shaped through the dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). I chose portraiture because of my experiences working collaboratively with international teachers in the elementary setting and because I find narrative descriptions of experiences compelling and informative. As the purpose of this study is to explore, acknowledge, and document the experiences of international teachers who work and live in the United States, portraits are an excellent method to present these experiences in rich detail. To collect data for this study, I conducted a series of interviews with three international educators who work in public schools before crafting individual portraits of each of the three teachers. Portraits require rich-detailed descriptions gathered by listening, observing, and interacting with individuals over time. There are five significant aspects of constructing portraits: emerging themes, relationships, context, voice, and the aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot &

Davis, 1997). In Chapter III, I explain in more detail why portraiture is a suitable method for my study and provide rich detail on portraiture as a methodology.

Theoretical Influences

Many changes and challenges confront international teachers as they navigate a new community. In this study, I draw on both Border Crossing and Culture Shock theories to help understand international teachers' experiences. The theory of Border Crossing is about individuals' experiences as they transition from one culture to another and how this transition shapes them (Clark, 2000). Similarly, culture shock theories are about the transition process of individuals when confronted with an unfamiliar environment (Cupsa, 2018).

Border Crossing Theory

Border Crossing theory is a lens used by scholars to examine the experiences that individual students and teachers have when they cross into the United States. Gloria Anzaldua was one of the first scholars to use the term border crossing, which refers to moving across cultural borders in society, including the borders related to race, gender, and geography (Niday & Allender, 2000). According to Wilson-Cooper et al. (2014), "Educational borderlands are the physical and conceptual landscapes where one must negotiate notions of cultural difference as exclusionary tactics typically guard her, or he lives and learns – landscapes that envelop an array of pedagogical and cultural spaces" (p. 1). Borders are present within many facets of our society, both in social constructs and natural landscapes. These borders can block, segregate, disempower, prevent, or restrict the passage of minorities by the dominant culture. Theorists who write about Border Crossing argue that there are multiple cultural wars where individuals fight for power and opportunities in educational borderlands.

There are three types of barriers discussed as part of Border Crossing theory: geopolitical, institutional, and home communities (Wilson-Cooper et al., 2014, p. 1). International educators must cross through all three borders while working in schools. Politics of race and culture exist on the geopolitical border, especially in navigating the immigration system and settling in another country. The institutional border focuses on school-based practices and experiences. Individuals experience restrictions in the curriculum, education policies, and rules within this border. The home community borders are where individuals live, grow, and become immersed in social areas. These three borders do not exist alone; they overlap and intersect. Successfully navigating these borders is challenging for international educators and others who struggle to feel welcomed by the majority and groups from diverse cultures – when, in fact, they may not feel welcomed.

International teachers move across many borders that are literal and metaphoric. Drawing on knowledge and understanding of border crossing theory, I created interview questions to help my participants to elaborate on the problems they have experienced while in the U.S., including those related to transcending borders. As part of my interviews with international teachers, I also gleaned information about their challenges and how they negotiated and overcame these challenges. Additionally, I drew upon border theory to analyze my interview transcripts, looking for key moments in international teachers' experiences that might suggest efforts to transcend borders.

Culture Shock Theory

Culture shock theorists consider the struggles individuals may experience as they navigate cultural change for several reasons, such as moving to a new place, job, or situation. Kalervo Oberg coined the term culture shock in 1954; other theorists have elaborated and refined

cultural shock theories (Oberg, 1954; Halicioglu, 2015). Culture shock happens to many individuals as they assimilate into any new society. As part of navigating a new place or community, international teachers must learn to negotiate new cultural norms, form relationships, and ideally create a sense of belonging in their new location. Culture shock theory helped me to understand and interpret the personal and professional challenges foreign teachers face as they migrate from their homeland to new communities in the United States.

The culture of a new place confronts international teachers who relocate to the states. I was interested in whether international teachers in my study experienced culture shock and, if so, how they negotiated it, especially in educational spaces. During interviews, I asked questions to help uncover culture shock examples and assess how individuals adjusted and navigated these events.

Researcher Experience and Role in the Study

My interest in studying foreign educators results from my positive experiences working alongside educators from other countries. Throughout my educational teaching and leadership career, I have kept a journal about my various experiences with international teachers. I have had numerous occasions to engage with educators from all over the world; I am always learning about this unique group of individuals. Before beginning this research, I had not considered that there might be a dark side to the practice of recruiting international teachers. For example, districts may hire international teachers at a lower pay rate to save money (Goldstein, 2018; Dunn, 2013), or it may be the case “that the teacher shortage is a problem of teacher turnover and teacher distribution” (Dunn, 2013, p. 5), not an issue of limited supply.

Some scholars suggest that the recruitment of international teachers globalizes the workforce, whereas other researchers disagree. According to Dunn (2011), “Being able to share

stories about other countries does not automatically make one culturally relevant or able to teach diverse content while acknowledging and respecting students' cultural backgrounds" (p. 1381).

Researchers who may be suspicious of this practice believe hiring international educators is part of a neoliberal trend. This trend "makes it look like policymakers care about public education when the harsh reality is that it is easier and cheaper to hire teachers from abroad than to solve the systemic problems in urban schools" (Dunn, 2011). I also never thought much about the fact that not all teachers from abroad have positive experiences or considered the challenges they face while teaching in American schools. This dissertation helped me to understand better the range of backgrounds and perspectives that international teachers have at a deeper level than my own experiences.

I am an educator with twenty-nine years of experience working in elementary schools; eight years were spent in a global school as an assistant principal. In my role at a global school, I supported teachers and students in developing a global school focus; therefore, international education was an integral part of my personal Professional Development Plan (PDP). The PDP is a yearly plan to guide my growth as an administrator. My previous school was designated as a Global Ready School, which meant that we supported students with experiences that prepared them as engaged and productive citizens in our ever-changing society. My work as a global educator was highlighted in the professional instructional and strategic leadership components of my evaluation. As we grew as a global school, I regularly assessed how well I supported global competencies and supported my students, staff, and school community in developing these competencies as well.

The staff I worked with at the global school was diverse and included international teachers from the global regions of Europe, Asia, North America, South America, Africa, and

Oceania. I worked alongside many foreign teachers; I always found listening to others' stories exhilarating and engaging; therefore, portraiture made good sense as a method for my study. As a portraitist, I drew the embedded themes out of the stories and determined each portrait's focus.

As a member of my former school's administrative and global team, I supported the staff through active participation in professional development surrounding global issues through planning, modeling, and support. During my administrative internship for my Education Specialist licensure, I served on the global district team, where I took part in planning professional development and collaboration opportunities for educators working in global schools. As the state's first Assistant Principal to receive the Global Educators endorsement on my license, I was recognized by the North Carolina Department of Instruction. I received the North Carolina Global Educators Digital Badge, a micro-credential that recognizes my work as a global educator. I supported involvement in events that enhanced learning during the school year, which was essential to my growth as a global learner and leader. As an assistant principal, my role was to support, collaborate, and motivate all stakeholders involved in our global school. Learning more about the experiences of international teachers was a natural fit for my personal and professional goals. While I enjoyed my work in a global school, while writing this dissertation, I received a transfer to a non-global middle school. I am currently completing my first year in my new assignment; next year, we will hire our first international teacher to support the rising immersion program in our middle school.

Significance of the Study

As a public-school administrator, I work directly with international teachers. Studying international educators is valuable, as they represent a unique population in urban schools in North Carolina and across the nation, and not much is known about their experiences. CNN

reporters Yan, Chiaramonte, and Lagamayo (2019) discovered that some members of educational communities and the greater public are questioning the educational purpose and value of hiring non-native teachers. This trend hit home for me recently when I attended a local school board meeting in my community, where board members questioned international teachers' educational backgrounds. They asked questions about international teachers employed in the school community that they typically would not ask about U.S. born teachers, for example, about their academic preparation, background knowledge, and experience before arriving in the United States. Presumably, the goal of the discussion was to ensure that staff who instruct students within the district are highly qualified and provide a quality education aligned to its mission.

Additionally, the board members questioned the reasons behind not hiring recent graduates from local universities' teaching programs, assuming there are many such applicants given the district's central location in the state (and surrounded by several universities). The board expressed their concern because there is a growing presence of international teachers in American schools, partly due to the lack of qualified applicants in vacancies challenging to fill. According to Spegman (2017), "Districts faced with hard-to-fill vacancies—in math, science, and bilingual education, among other subjects—look for candidates abroad" (p. 34). Based on local board members' comments in my district, it seems evident that they are not always well-informed about staffing challenges and needs or teacher qualifications.

My research is significant because educational communities have questioned the educational purpose and the value of hiring international teachers. I studied educators from abroad who teach at the elementary level. Given the limited literature on this population specifically at the elementary level, I incorporate literature from K-12 educators in my review of

research in the next chapter. To further support my study, I also review studies about international students, assuming some of their experiences will parallel those of international teachers. There is limited research about educators' educational preparation, background, and teaching experience from abroad before they arrive to teach in American schools. Additionally, I want to challenge assumptions about international educators who are recruited and hired to work in the U.S., for example, that they are not qualified, have limited experience, or that they are hired because they are cheaper (Books & Villiers, 2013; Goldstein, 2018; Kissau, 2013; Yan et al., 2019).

In a study by the Learning Policy Institute, researchers described how “teacher shortages are not felt uniformly across all communities and classrooms, but instead affect some states, subject areas, and student populations more than others” (Sutcher et al., 2016. p. 5). Competitive wages, teacher working conditions, and supportive programs influence the availability of qualified educators in a district. Additionally, the availability of individuals trained and willing to work is also a concern. Many schools and districts continue to be confronted by the lack of highly skilled educators in Title 1, at-risk schools, and impoverished communities (Sutcher et al., 2020). Schools with special needs students also struggle to fill their Exceptional Children's department positions. Additionally, schools that require educators trained in bilingual education or language instruction continue are challenged to fill vacancies (Sutcher et al., 2010).

As an administrator who supports international educators, I aim to understand and share their experiences. This study will inform administrators and other district leaders about the educational journey of educators from different countries. I anticipate this information will help educators to design and provide appropriate support for foreign teachers, increasing their understanding of American schools.

Overview of Study

In this first chapter, I presented an overview and introduction to my research study focusing on international educators' experiences at the elementary level. I introduced background information, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. I also briefly described the portraiture method I will use to answer my research questions, the theories that influence my study, and my experiences related to this study's topic. Finally, I wrote about the significance of the study.

In Chapter II, I review related literature on international teachers' experiences working in U.S. schools. Since there is a lack of current studies concerning teachers' experiences from abroad, I support this section by adding information from parallel studies related to international students' experiences at the college level. Additionally, I explain how international educators can provide an example of authentic language use and offer a global perspective.

In Chapter III, I describe the qualitative research design and method I used in my study. I used portraiture as a qualitative method. I conducted three interviews each with three international teachers, to gather data. I then developed portraits of their individual experiences from the data I collected in these interviews. In this chapter, I share information related to the collection of data and the methods of this study. I also discuss issues of data analysis, reporting, and trustworthiness.

In Chapters IV, V, and VI, I share my study's findings by presenting three individual portraits. I developed these portraits from the interviews I conducted with international teachers working in public elementary schools in North Carolina with dual language/immersion programs or global schools. Within each portrait, I also provide background information about each educator and the context of where they are teaching.

In Chapter VII, I share my findings and analyze information across the three portraits. I also answer my research question. I discuss the implications of my study, placing my findings back in conversation with the literature. Finally, I provide recommendations for research and practice and conclude with a reflection on the study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I examine the literature related to the experiences of international teachers in U.S. schools. Since current literature concerning international educators is sparse, I consider older studies and studies related to the experiences of international students and teachers working at the college level in the United States as these are likely to parallel those of international elementary school teachers. In reviewing this literature, I share why it is essential to understand international teachers' experiences working in American educational settings.

There is a dearth of current research concerning the experiences of foreign-born educators working in U.S. public schools, despite the increase in the number of international educators migrating to teach in classrooms and in schools where global education and dual-language programs exist (Dunn, 2011; Bense, 2016). In these educational settings, teachers from overseas are encouraged to share their culture with students, faculty, and staff in U.S. schools and bring diverse perspectives and experiences (Dunn, 2011). I divide my review into the following sections: literature related to international teachers' recruitment and hiring, international teachers' contributions, challenges they face as they assimilate into American culture and society, and experiences of international students.

The Recruitment of International Educators

In this section, I share research related to international teachers' recruitment to work in public schools in the United States. Teacher shortages are one of the many reasons school districts across the nation hire teachers from other countries. According to a study by the American Federation of Teachers (2009), there is a growing presence of international educators working in American classrooms and teaching in various roles. Scholars acknowledge the shortage of teachers prepared to teach in language immersion settings in the United States

(Swanson, 2014). This shortage has led to hiring teachers from foreign countries. However, there is a lack of research documenting international educators' experiences working in American schools (Books & Villiers, 2014; Kissau, 2014; Kissau, Yon, & Algozzine, 2012). As I have previously stated, teacher shortages are not a new phenomenon. Teacher shortages have been an ongoing issue for decades. According to the *A Nation at Risk* report, "severe shortages of certain kinds of teachers exist: in the fields of mathematics, science, and foreign languages; and among specialists in education for gifted and talented, language minority, and handicapped students" (Gardner, 1983). This problem of shortages has continued for decades.

Over ten years ago, the American Federation of Teachers (2009) "estimated that districts would need to hire 200,000 new teachers each year to fill various positions, approximately 70,000 of them in high-poverty urban areas" (p. 10). More recently, the Learning Policy Institute reported an increase in teaching vacancies. They based their assessment on the declined enrollment of individuals in teacher preparation programs, increased student enrollment, lower student-teacher ratios, and high teacher turnover (Sutcher et al., 2019). "Nearly every state in the United States is reporting shortages, and most states are electing to hire teachers not licensed for their teaching assignments" (Sutcher et al., 2019, p. 2). However, school districts continue to grow in enrollment with an estimated shortfall of 300,000 teachers annually. Despite recruitment efforts, both urban and rural school systems struggle to fill teacher vacancies (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

According to the American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages, "the teacher shortage has reached a critical stage, the worst in over 50 years of record-keeping" (Kissau et al., 2019, p. 187). Despite the growing number of teaching vacancies, enrollment in teacher education programs has fallen, and the demand for teachers continues to climb (Swanson, 2010).

A myriad of factors contributes to the increasing need to hire qualified teachers across the nation. These reasons include increasing student enrollments, high student-teacher ratios, teacher attrition, limited teacher supply, public perception of the teaching profession, lack of preparation, lack of support in the classroom, poor teacher working conditions, and low salaries (Kissau, Davin, & Wang, 2018; Swanson, 2010, 2014; Sutchter et al., 2019). These causes explain what Kissau et al. (2018) call the teacher shortage a “tsunami.” With a lack of highly qualified U.S.-born and trained candidates, districts hire teachers from abroad (AFT, 2009). Since the recession of 2015 ended, there has been a growth in educational programs that support students with special needs in high-poverty schools, creating further demand for skilled teachers. According to Walkenhorst (2022), North Carolina currently leads the nation in the number of international educators they recruit to teach their students. “International teachers have more than quadrupled in the state in the past decade to more than 2,100 teachers. North Carolina spent \$121.4 million this year on teachers coming from abroad—six times what it did a decade ago.” This increase correlates to a nationwide problem in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers related to schools that support global education and traditional instruction. Wolf (2022) notes, “Public school districts across the state are struggling with skyrocketing teacher vacancies and a dearth of candidates to fill critical positions” (NC Policy Watch, 2022).

In the media, an increasing number of articles and special reports document hiring international teachers, including how various agencies recruit teachers (Dunn, 2011; Swanson, 2014; Diaz & Mahadevan, 2011). By using recruiting agencies, international teachers have access to resources to navigate complex processes and political and social obstacles, including obtaining a work visa. Recruiting agencies are hired to serve as a liaison between the international teaching candidates and schools. These agencies coordinate contacts and line up

mentors to support international teachers in the United States as they their place within the hiring districts. We need to understand what support these educators need to overcome challenges, succeed, and stay motivated while working abroad. We also need to value international teachers' contributions to U.S. students.

The Contributions of International Teachers to U.S. Education

International teachers provide significant contributions to districts around the country. Kissau et al. (2012) stated, "Foreign teachers help to fill vacant positions and bring with them native fluency in the language of instruction, have access to authentic cultural resources, and offer unique insights into their native culture" (p. 23). Also, educators from abroad serve in local school districts to help students view their learning through the varied perspectives of a global lens. These teachers also share information about their home county with students, providing cross-cultural perspectives. International teachers also enrich student learning by bringing unique insights. However, international teachers can also face challenges. "International teachers may bring global perspectives, but they may also have significant problems understanding and connecting to the culture of urban American students" (Dunn, 2011, p. 1381).

Like many sojourners before them, international teachers journey to the U.S. seeking the land of opportunity, hoping to experience another culture and experience life in a new land. Some also hope this will lead to a better future for themselves and their families (Kissau, 2014). There are many benefits to the presence of international teachers in American classrooms. At the same time, Dunn (2011) notes that international teachers also gain much from their experiences. For the teachers, these benefits include fulfilling a personal need for adventure, earning higher salaries, gaining exposure to new teaching methodologies, and enjoying experiences in American schools, making them more marketable in their own country and around the world (Bense,

2016). Moreover, international teachers help address the critical shortage of qualified language teachers to teach in global schools and language programs while exposing students to diverse cultures outside of their community.

International educators contribute to the internationalization of American schools and help prepare students to live in a multicultural, global society. They fill vacant positions, bring native fluency to the language instruction, use real-life languages in real-life situations, share cultural resources and wealth, and offer insight into their native countries (Kissau, Yon, & Algozzine, 2012).

Additionally, districts benefit from the diversity that international teachers bring to U.S. classrooms as they learn to negotiate community culture, form relationships, and create a sense of belonging. For example, in a special news report documented and broadcast on CNN (Yan, Chiramonte, & Lagamayo, 2019), the reporters profile the experience of Jovie Alvarado, a teacher from the Philippines. Alvarado moved to Arizona to fill one of the 7,000 vacancies for a wage eight times the amount she would have made in the Philippines, which provided Jovie with significant financial opportunities while filling a need in Arizona schools (Yan et al., 2019).

Challenges Faced by International Teachers

From reading the literature on the recruitment and experiences of international teachers, it is evident there are various challenges related to their assimilation into American schools and communities. Some educators are challenged by language barriers and issues related to teaching and instruction. Other educators face intense scrutiny in their communities and struggle to assimilate. In this section, I explore challenges related to assimilation into professional life and culture shock.

Instructional Concerns

One of the primary complaints people, including parents, school community members, and even other teachers, lodge about international teachers is that they are not qualified. There are concerns about international educators' understanding of the United States teaching standards, their content knowledge, and whether they have relevant teaching experience. For example, Kissau (2014) writes,

Despite being intelligent and hard-working individuals, many international teachers have been reported to struggle in the context of K-12 classrooms. Many well-educated international teachers with multiple years of successful teaching experience in their native lands are often reported to have deficiencies in U.S. classrooms that can render instructions ineffective. (p. 67)

These deficiencies include struggles in understanding the curriculum, students' unique learning needs, the teaching methodologies used in American schools, and the academic language common in the U.S. context. Unfortunately, some international teachers lack the necessary language skills and knowledge to meet students' unique needs, sometimes because they do not have certification, causing them to appear not prepared to teach (Lee, 2015).

Discipline

Researchers have uncovered how international teachers sometimes have different expectations of their students than their American counterparts, particularly in terms of behavior. Finney, Torres, and Jurs (2002) studied the experiences of educators from Spain working in the southeast United States. They describe how “the teachers they studied experienced difficulties with classroom management and discipline; lack of awareness about school procedures and policies; new instructional strategies, curricula, and philosophies; and culture shock” (Dunn,

2011, p. 1384). Moreover, Dunn reports that these teachers from abroad had difficulties connecting to students and forming relationships with staff and students, impacting discipline and classroom management. Teachers also noted feeling lost in their new school due to cultural differences and behavioral expectations (Dunn, 2011; Lee, 2015). One teacher Dunn (2011) interviewed noted:

There are many hard parts because of a whole new culture with different people, different teaching methods, and different situations. Most importantly, there are different kids. You cannot even compare time; it is day and night there. Dressing style is different; the way you speak and live differently. The way you express yourself is different. Nothing is similar. (p. 1394)

Challenges also extend to the international teachers' classrooms, particularly regarding classroom discipline and understanding of the United States' social, political, and educational context. In a study of international language teachers from Germany, researchers explain that teachers sometimes find it challenging to motivate American students (Kissau, Rodger, & Haudeck, 2014). German teachers felt that students back in their homelands were more prepared and motivated to learn and were more academically engaged. In the same study, the researchers stress the importance of learning about U.S. culture, making connections with students, and collaborating with colleagues to navigate the classroom challenges and available support.

Supporting teachers is essential because, in many cultures, educators experience being revered and respected in their country because of their content knowledge and educational degrees and their successful professional track record in their home culture (Dunn, 2013; Lee, 2015; Fee, 2011). Furthermore, teachers from many other countries are treated with an elevated level of respect in their native context, and therefore, maintaining discipline and classroom

management has not been an issue for these teachers. When teachers enter an unfamiliar and unknown culture, it can cause challenges in the professional and social environment. One of the most significant challenges teachers face as venture to a new setting is culture shock.

Culture Shock

Expectations from anyone traveling abroad can potentially shape their experiences upon their arrival. Their initial arrival experience may compound the challenges international educators face once they arrive to teach in schools. Dunn (2011) wrote about the experiences of four educators from India: “From the moment they arrived in the U.S., they were placed in distressing situations, suffering from jetlag, and reported of being rushed to their schools for orientations with their districts” (p. 1391). According to Dunn (2013), some educators reported being dropped off at their new school without an orientation by school administration and an inadequate time to process the provided information. Other teachers reported that no one provided a staff greeting, leaving them feeling disoriented and unprepared for their new teaching assignment. These educators reported they were “abruptly thrust into their new culture, and it was a demanding shock” as their hiring school districts neglected their need to find their place in their new community (p. 31).

Culture shock is one of the most significant issues many international teachers face when they arrive in the United States. Culture is complicated and goes beyond what you can see. According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), “culture refers to the characteristics of the everyday life of a group of people located in a given time and place” (p. 36). Culture shock can negatively impact how individuals feel in new social situations or unfamiliar cultural environments, causing them to feel like they are a “fish out of water,” overwhelmed and frightened (Cupsa, 2018, p. 182). Halicioglu (2015) warns of the cultural shock that teachers face in new settings,

Teachers considering moving abroad to work need to research carefully and prepare themselves since the change of location and culture, the change in the student body and colleagues, the change of parental expectations, and the loss of familiar signs and symbols may have a significant impact on their professional satisfaction and personal happiness. (p. 242)

What happens when the place we are the most familiar with dramatically changes or shifts?

Often the result is *culture shock*.

Educators who choose to leave their home country and embark on an adventure that moves them from their homeland must research and plan for life in a new setting. According to Charmaz (2014), “a journey begins before the travelers depart” (p. 1). Despite international teachers’ efforts to research and prepare for a life in a different place, they cannot easily plan for the culture shock they often face.

Culture shock is not a new concept. Originally “coined“ in the 1950s, the term culture shock was developed by social anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (Fee, 2011, p. 244). Oberg (1960) defines culture shock as an “occupational disease of people who have suddenly moved abroad” (as cited in Roskill, 2013, p. 156). Culture shock involves many emotions, including feelings of anxiousness or disorientation when individuals move to an unfamiliar culture, place, or lifestyle.

Some international teachers face culture shock. Their personal and professional lives are interrupted as they learn to navigate new and unfamiliar work and living situations. Similarly, U.S. teachers also experience culture shock when they relocate abroad to teach in other nations (Dunn, 2013; Roskill, 2013). When international teachers enter the United States, sometimes “everything is unfamiliar, from weather, landscape, language, food, fashion, values and customs” (United States Department of State, 2019). These migrating professionals have experiences

related to culture shock when they immerse themselves in communities that are different from their own, often leaving them feeling disoriented or confused (Madrid et al., 2016).

When individuals move to a new place, they may feel homesick or lonely as they adjust to life away from their homeland, away from familiar customs, routines, foods, values, and languages. Problems related to culture shock are compounded by the amount of time international educators must adjust to their new world before beginning their teaching experience in American schools. Crossing borders and moving to an unfamiliar environment can be stressful, and individuals migrating to a new country face a myriad of issues. Issues that face immigrants and relocating professionals can relate to their personal and professional lives (Fee, 2011). The degree of culture shock that individuals experience depends on numerous factors, including the amount of time they will teach abroad, whether they are traveling alone or with a support system, and how flexible they are. Additionally, educators from abroad may struggle with many differences between their home and host culture and their expectations of the experience, which may not be matched by reality (USDOS, 2019).

As international educators move across borders, they can go through culture shock stages as they adapt to their new life. Everyone goes through this process on a unique timeline and not everyone experiences all the stages. Some educators struggle to adjust, and others navigate the system with less stress and difficulty. Culture shock symptoms include feeling homesick, depressed, irritable, frustrated, and exhausted (USDOS, 2019). According to Dunn (2013), citing Visiting International Faculty (2006), “Culture shock is an almost unavoidable consequence and a challenge every international teacher will experience” (p. 30). Individuals who struggle to adjust to their new lives as educators in American schools may suffer from low self-esteem. Distressed educators may have an increased dissatisfaction with their teaching position, which

can cause them to leave their situation, one of the reasons that research on, and support for, international teachers are essential.

Phases of Culture Shock

Emotional stress occurs when individuals migrate to unfamiliar places and transition to unfamiliar cultural settings. In this study, I drew on culture shock phases to understand the challenging and stressful experiences of my participants. Researchers use multiple frameworks to explain the culture shock phenomenon and its impact on individuals socially and emotionally. Several scholars and studies suggest between four and five phases that an individual navigates through while crossing from one culture to another (Oberg, 1954; Cupsa, 2018; Roskell, 2013; Sevim & Hall, 2018; Madrid et al., 2016). International educators undergo a period of adjustment when they move to a new place or culture, even if they feel well prepared. Halicioglu (2015) wrote about the potential challenges that educators face when moving abroad, noting the importance of taking the time to research and prepare for the transition personally and professionally and she suggests that being unprepared for change may significantly impact their happiness and satisfaction (Halicioglu, 2015; Dunn, 2013). Individuals transitioning into new surroundings may struggle to assimilate despite careful research and planning.

According to Oberg (1954), culture shock phases include Honeymoon, Aggression, Superior, and Adjustment. As culture shock is a process, individuals experience these phases to a different degree and for different amounts of time. According to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Cultural Affairs website (2020), "The degree of shock depends on such factors as length of study abroad, flexibility, and tolerance for ambiguity, degree of difference between home and host culture, prior experience abroad, and his or her expectations."

The Honeymoon Phase. According to Oberg (1954), the first phase of culture shock is the Honeymoon Phase. In this phase, individuals experience euphoria and fascination with their new culture and life. Individuals are excited about trying new things and exploring new places, even romanticizing their new life in their new home. Oberg (1954) argues that the Honeymoon stage may last a few days, weeks, or months depending on the circumstances (p. 2). Sevim and Hall (2018) describe the excitement of this phase: “Living in a new culture is seen as a way of socializing and enjoying life as it offers new learning opportunities” (p. 451). Individuals’ experiences during this phase are typically positive as they are excited about new adventures.

The Aggression Phase. When individuals move to a new place, they may feel homesick, lonely, and frustrated as they adjust to life away from their homeland. As these individuals navigate the differences between their native culture and their new community, they may have feelings of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression. The excitement of the newness of the previous phase transforms into frustration and aggression because the situation is not what they envisioned. During the Aggression Phase, educators and other travelers abroad may experience rejection, irritability, crisis, or objection to their new personal or professional situations. These cross-cultural transitions can cause physical and psychological stress, forcing educators to feel alone and distressed. “Culture shock manifests as anxiety, stress, and disorientation and arises when an individual is confronted with an unfamiliar environment where existing familiar social patterns are rendered ineffective” (Roskell, 2013, p. 155).

The Superior Phase. According to Oberg (1954), the third phase of culture shock is the Superior Phase. During this phase, individuals begin the process of gradual adjustment and experience a sense of reorganization. Individuals start on the path of recovery from some of the stressful symptoms they experienced in the previous phase. Cupsa (2018) states, “the stages of

culture shock involve continuous processing, reorganization, and restructuring that takes place at different levels: cognitive, emotional, and physical” (p. 181). During this phase, individuals begin to take charge of their feelings of anxiety and decide to stay in their new environment or seek the comfort of a more familiar place. Individuals feel more empowered, even superior, and they begin to enter the process of adjustment.

Adjustment. The fourth phase of culture shock is called Adjustment. According to Halicioglu (2015), in this phase, individuals work to adjust to their new setting, accept the changes that come in their new context, and recover from previous stages. During Adjustment, individuals have increased self-esteem and more frequent social interactions (Roskell, 2013, p. 157). According to Oberg (1954), in the Adjustment Phase, individuals accept their new environment and adapt, accepting the customs of the country they are in and “operate within the new milieu without a feeling of anxiety although there are moments of strain” (p. 4). In this phase, individuals adapt and adjust to their new community and lifestyle, feeling prepared and empowered to face challenges (Oberg, 1954; Dutton, 2011).

The Experiences of International Teachers and Students With Culture Shock

There is limited research addressing international teachers’ experiences working in the United States and coping with culture shock. However, there is current literature about the challenges college staff and students face when traveling abroad for educational purposes and navigating their transition into American culture and culture shock (Milian et al., 2015; Zimmerman, 2015). Shallenberger (2015), a college professor with firsthand experience in supporting international students traveling abroad, wrote about his experience traveling with international students:

Cross-cultural situations are often stressful, which can lead to less-than-functional behavior for all involved, including trying to protect students from what could be a powerful learning experience, what one called a young adult's strongest developmental process – experiencing, making mistakes, reflecting, and learning from them. (p. 262)

Culture shock affects individuals who migrate for professional reasons and students. Madrid et al. (2016) stated that culture shock affects migrating individuals as they adjust to teaching and life in various places, cultural contexts, and a new curriculum. Being immersed in unfamiliar settings can cause emotional stress and culture shock. Culture shock complicates the cross-cultural experience as the teacher must learn to navigate a new educational system and environment.

The Experiences of International Students

In this study, I explore international educators' challenges and how they overcome these challenges. School systems in the U.S. have recruited international teachers worldwide from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to support the growing diverse student population. Due to the lack of studies related to international teachers, in this section, I consider research concerning international students in the United States, assuming their experiences may be similar to the experiences of new teachers. Much more has been written about these sojourners. An international student is a learner enrolled in coursework at a college or university using an F-1 and J-1 visa, which permits them to study abroad (Gautam et al., 2016; Ssempala, 2015). Across the nation, international student enrollment continues to increase at American post-secondary schools (International Institution of Education [IIE], 2020; Yan & Pei, 2018). With the increasing number of international students pursuing coursework in the United States, a

growing body of research is dedicated to documenting their challenges when transitioning and acclimating to studying at American higher learning institutions and society.

Background Information

Each year, colleges and universities host international students. The United States has historically been a highly desirable destination for international students due to the quality of its higher education system, range of opportunities, and perceived welcoming culture (Ssempala, 2015). In their study of the challenges and benefits of studying abroad, Milian et al. (2015) state that colleges and universities in the United States have more international students than any other destination (p. 1). Students from abroad have access to various academic programs that will prepare them for globally competitive careers when in the United States. As I discussed in my introduction, many international recruitment efforts are related to the Fulbright Act, which promotes programs to “attract future leaders from abroad to study, learn, and exchange experiences” (USDOE website).

According to a report published by the U.S. Department of State, *The Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* (2021), an annual census of International Students who study at colleges and universities in the U.S, the trend of international students who enroll in programs continues to increase (<https://opendoorsdata.org>) steadily. The study recorded that universities in the U.S. hosted approximately 1 million of the 4.6 million internationally enrolled students in 2019 (<https://opendoorsdata.org>).

Before the Trump administration’s executive orders and stringent policies related to immigration and restricting international individuals’ admission, the number of international students studying in the U.S was rising. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has led to immigration restrictions and increased xenophobic sentiment and discrimination (Alam & Asef, 2020). These

current events have impacted the national and global economy and inevitably affected individuals' desire to travel for educational opportunities here and abroad.

Lessons Learned from International Students

Colleges and universities are becoming increasingly concerned about student enrollment and the enrollment of international students. Higher education institutions have benefited from many international students, including the financial benefits they brought in the past. Four-year universities and community colleges in the United States focus on recruiting international students for the skills and experiences they bring to U.S. campuses and aid educational institutions and bring economic benefits.

Post-secondary schools often market their schools to attract international students. Schools believe that international students bring financial and cultural benefits, assuming that they share their native culture and knowledge of the world with American students. International graduate students play an essential role in teaching and serving as research assistants while supporting other students outside the graduate school classroom. Ssempala (2015) stated, "International students make significant contributions to institutions' diversity, revenue, investment, research, and teaching" (p. 5738). When international graduate students stay in the U.S., they bring financial benefits when they complete their educational programs. If they return to their native country and economy, their homeland will benefit from their increased knowledge, training, and experience (Gautam et al., 2016). Additionally, students who study abroad develop an understanding of the learning community and build a professional network that may translate to success in their home country if they can remain and then graduate from a U.S. college or university.

Prior studies have stated that international students actively enhance higher education internationalization (Wekullo, 2019). According to Rhodes (2015), internationalization refers to how universities and educational institutions incorporate global perspectives into teaching, learning, and research with students, faculty, and staff. Some of these benefits include interest in recruiting international students, supporting the development of revenue-generating exchange programs, collaboration with other universities globally, and devising plans to increase diversity in campuses and communities around the nation. Once students assimilate into American culture, sojourners overcome numerous struggles, including developing a sense of belonging, experiencing a feeling of acceptance, establishing friendships, developing cultural understanding, and achieving academic success (Rodríguez, Chavez, & Klauber, 2019). The challenges these international students face in terms of language, learning, and social adjustment are likely to be shared by international teachers.

Language

Based on current research, international students may face more difficulties than American peers in terms of language. In their study of international students from areas of Asia and Mexico whose native language is not English, Gautam et al. (2016) found that international students have linguistic challenges that affect social adjustment and present a barrier to creating meaningful friendships. The lack of fluency in the language of the host country can cause international students to feel alienated from other students, faculty, and the community, affecting their ability to engage in the learning environment successfully. Some international students experience discrimination due to being different from American students, which can cause frustration when interacting with native English speakers.

Other challenges that international students can experience include difficulties interpreting verbal and nonverbal language. “These students often struggle with unfamiliar language usage and slang, errors in translation from one language to another, and misunderstandings of idioms, similes, and metaphors” (Cardona et al., 2013, p. 1). Some examples of language challenges involve understanding the nuances of the English language, including slang, sarcasm, and the rate of speech, causing international sojourners to feel insecure as they adjust to a new learning and living situation. Students who struggle with the nuances of the language cannot fully engage in the learning environment and learning community. Learning a new language may cause non-native English speakers to struggle with acclimating to life. According to Gebhard (2012), “Researchers have provided an understanding of the kinds of problems international students have while adapting to university life, and one of the most discussed is problems with academic language” (p. 184).

Additional problems may cause international students to feel isolated, inferior, and alienated, depriving them of social and educational engagement opportunities (Gautam et al., 2016). Adverse experiences may impact their academic and social experience, affecting their ability to adapt and develop confidence, consequently impeding their desire to continue their current situation.

Learning

International students face a plethora of challenges academically at higher education institutions regardless of the program of study or level of enrollment, either undergraduate or graduate (Cardona et al., 2013). Challenges they face may also interfere with their academic achievement compared to their domestic counterparts’ academic success. They may have limitations in presenting their understanding of instructional content in both written and spoken

forms. Additionally, students from abroad may arrive with minimal academic counseling, limited knowledge of the school and community's resources, and challenges in knowing where to find support.

International students who elect to enroll in American educational institutions typically are academically prepared and have a personal plan. However, they may struggle to live and study within unfamiliar communities and cultures different from those they are accustomed to in their homeland, leaving them overwhelmed, stressed, and even lonely. According to Yan and Pei (2018), "Although international students are clearly not a homogeneous group by any means – in fact very diverse – studies have shown that students from various cultures have similar challenges adjusting to American culture and educational practices" (p. 454). In a study of Chinese students conducted by Yuan (2011), he quotes a student's academic struggles with the English language and acclimation to American culture:

Back in my country, students sit, and the professor provides you with information in lecture form. Still, when I came here, I found it was different. I had to take an active role as a learner. I had to read and search for information that was shared with me. (p. 145)

These students' experiences offer insight into the challenges international teachers might face in the U.S. setting, particularly in terms of their expectations of students and the level of respect they are used to back home.

Social Adjustment and Acclimation

After international students arrive in the United States, they go through a social and cultural adjustment phase just as international educators do. Collins and Callaghan (2018) state, "Cross-cultural adaptation refers to helping students cope with cultural changes for adaptation to be successful" (p. 268). Adapting to life in America can be frustrating for international students

because the language and culture are different. Students indicate feeling homesick for their family and culture, which causes them to feel lonely and emotional when navigating a new culture and community. When international students arrive in a new school community, they struggle to understand cultural norms different from their native culture, which can cause depression, anxiety, and culture shock, leaving them to question their decision to move to a new place (Gautam et al., 2016; Milian, 2016). Describing this experience, Yuan (2011) writes,

When I share with my peers in class, it is different from what is going on in my country, so that one almost gave me a shock that I had to overcome as I progressed with my studies. I was not prepared for what I found here in the United States. (p. 145)

Overcoming these challenges can impact their experiences and sense of belonging in a new culture and learning environment. Studies show that international students can suffer personally and professionally. Students agree that there are challenges to studying abroad. Milan et al. (2013) state, “These challenges include problems understanding academic language, cultural understanding and norms, and understanding how to secure items for personal comfort such as housing” (p. 2). Studies of students from Asia, Africa, and South America indicate that many students experience culture shock (Gautam, 2016; Glass et al., 2013; Goldstein & Keller, 2016). Students indicate feeling homesick, alone, and emotionally drained while adapting to life in America and navigating new cultural understanding.

Students and educators from abroad may experience frustration with making friends and feeling welcome in the school community. Struggling to adapt and acclimate can result in insecurity, which may cause them to withdraw from social situations (Milan et al., 2013; Gebhard, 2012; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2010). Studies show that international students suffer personally and academically (Cardona et al., 2013). Some of these struggles may

result from discrimination as the population of international students is viewed as a minority and may not have sufficient or accessible resources, struggle with language, or know how to navigate the school culture, which can affect their confidence and personal wellbeing. “These challenges commonly include perceived discrimination, racism, limited social support, feeling of isolation from family and friends, financial difficulties, adaptation to new cultural and social norms, potential culture shock, and challenges to adapt to new educational and learning styles” (Milan et al., 2013, p. 2). Students experiencing any challenge may have their ability to overcome struggles impact their ability to belong or feel adjusted as they adapt to their new lifestyle and learning environment.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature concerning the experiences of international educators’ who migrate to the United States for professional reasons. Researchers frequently discuss why states, districts, and schools hire educators from abroad. However, few studies document their experiences. Fee (2011) writes, “While there appears to be a continuing interest in hiring teachers from other countries, there is limited research on the challenges these teachers face or how to help them succeed” (p. 402). Furthermore, international students attend American universities and colleges for various reasons. Some come for the adventure and the idea of being a part of American culture. Others are seeking preparedness for globally competitive careers. No matter the reason, international students and teachers must overcome some challenges with participating in cross-cultural education. Universities and colleges (like schools and districts) would benefit from understanding this information as it can help them to support international students and workers. When international teachers can overcome these challenges, there are mutual benefits.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

In Chapter I, I introduced this study and my overriding research question: What are international teachers' experiences working in North Carolina public schools? In Chapter II, I offered an in-depth overview of the related literature, highlighting the hiring process international teachers navigate and discussing the benefits and challenges that international may face in their new settings. Since there is limited research on the challenges of international teachers in K-12 schools, I also described additional related research concerning international students' experiences at the university level, as their acclimation and navigation challenges are likely to be similar. In this chapter, I offer a detailed description of the methodology and methods I used to gather data for this study and answer my research questions. I use the qualitative methodology of portraiture in this study (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of international teachers who are hired specifically to teach in North Carolina as they cross from their home culture into American culture. By learning about international teachers' perspectives, educational leaders can better understand their contributions and challenges. Moreover, schools and district leaders can create pathways and networks of support by understanding their views.

There are no recent studies concerning international educators' experience, support, or assimilation into elementary public schools. This dissertation study aims to expand the current research by providing portraits of internationally trained teachers working in North Carolina public elementary schools. Throughout the research process, I explored gaps between expectations and the reality of their experiences as they assimilated into educators' roles living and working in American public schools. I was also interested in how they navigate everyday life within American culture and society.

Pilot Study

Initially, I conducted a pilot study as an essential first step of this dissertation project. During the pilot study, I had the opportunity to test my proposed research's feasibility and learn about the study's process and essential components. The features of my study pilot included designing the research question and interview guide, choosing the method to select participants, collecting data, and reporting the study's findings. My professors and peers suggested that I consider portraiture a qualitative approach due to my ability to share stories with richness and detail. I researched other studies using this method and read the classic text in the field, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997), which provided details into portraiture as a methodology. I describe how I draw on this methodology later within this chapter.

I conducted a pilot study over three semesters to test the topic's viability and my research protocol, starting in fall 2019 and continuing in the spring and summer of 2020. I interviewed four international teachers and completed classroom observations of each. During my pilot study, I maintained a journal of my interactions and the study process. I learned the importance of keeping detailed notes and reflections to make better use of this practice, and so I could use it as a reflexivity journal. I began reading more about using the reflexivity journal to ensure trustworthiness.

I initially used a face-to-face method to gather the data when conducting my pilot study. After the fall semester, due to the global health pandemic of COVID-19, it was necessary to change from face-to-face meetings to zoom meetings with international staff members. As I recruited participants for the pilot study, I explained my interest in documenting international teachers' stories and working in North Carolina.

Originally, I interviewed two different educators to test my questions and assess how much information I would need to craft a portrait, a new methodology for me. I considered giving them the questions from my interview guide at our initial meeting. Still, I decided to reserve my questions for when we met face-to-face, so my participants would not overthink their responses, and so I would not get rehearsed answers. During the pilot, I constructed an extensive list of questions. Given the number of questions I had, and my desire to get rich and detailed information about experiences, I decided it was best to complete several interviews with each participant. After conducting my first two interviews, I made some adjustments and met with my next two international teachers (in the spring of 2020) multiple times for shorter interviews. I reviewed the data gathered in previous interviews and asked follow-up questions to probe for additional insight. I found having the opportunity to meet numerous times was valuable as I could make some adjustments and refocus my questions. Additionally, I learned that my questions needed tweaking to gather more detailed information about the challenges and how participants overcame the challenges to craft a detailed portrait.

I also completed two classroom teaching observations in the fall semester. While I enjoyed watching the participants teach, it was hard to get useful information in such short sessions. I decided that observations would not give me the type of information required to compose a detailed portrait of international educators' experiences. After completing two observations, I abandoned this method.

While conducting the second phase of my pilot, a global pandemic struck. Due to the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), all North Carolina schools were closed by Governor Roy Cooper effective March 16, 2020. At this point, teachers were not allowed on campus. Consequently, I conducted and recorded the ensuing interviews via Zoom and asked

additional follow-up questions by phone. I transcribed the interviews using Otter, an online application.

Before the onset of the interview with Jasmine (the pilot participant whose narrative frames the opening to my dissertation), I asked her for some background information, as noted in Appendix A. I reviewed the questions with her before discussing that the interview plan was fluid and open to revision. I gave her time to review and asked that she let me know when she was ready to begin. I explained the portraiture methodology to her and how I would use the interview to tell her experiences and overcome challenges. I followed these same basic procedures with the participants in the dissertation study.

Research Question

I have one research question that drives this study:

- What are the experiences of international teachers recruited to teach in the United States?

In exploring my participants' experiences, I was particularly interested in how they became acclimated to their schools and U.S. society and overcame any challenges they faced.

Portraiture

In this research study, I used the qualitative research method of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). A portraitist is an *artist* who plays an active role in collecting and interpreting the stories of their participants. The art of portraiture is a qualitative research form “that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism to capture the complexity, dynamics, and boundaries of human experience and organizational life” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), a critical distinction between portraiture and many other forms of qualitative research is that “ethnographers listen *to* a story while portraitists

listen *for* a story” (p. 13). Additionally, people who use this methodology acknowledge and incorporate the importance of the researcher’s active role as they tell the story (Mathias & Petchauer, 2012).

As a school administrator, I value the relationships and the experiences that individual teachers bring to the classroom. For this dissertation, I sought a research method that captured the central importance of relationships and the full range of emotions that participants have in sharing their stories. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), “The artist needs to be vigilant in capturing the image, but always watchful of my feelings, perspectives, and experiences” (p. 4). In other words, being a portraitist allows me to share the personal stories of teachers from abroad with integrity and respect for their perspectives. Additionally, portraiture is unique to other qualitative forms of research, “where a researcher wishes to produce a full picture of an event or person that tells as much about the subject as it does about the researcher, or portraitist” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). Most importantly, portraitists examine the data to develop the stories of their participants.

Goodness

Portraitists gather information from interviews that help them create a holistic mental image for the reader that goes beyond random bits of facts, which develop into stories or narratives as “a search for goodness” (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005, p. 18). They seek “goodness,” which means they look for strength in individuals’ lives and stories. Portraitists examine how subjects meet, negotiate, and overcome challenges in their lives (Dixson et al., 2005, p. 18). These moments where individuals overcome challenges and find triumph over adversity are related to the “search for goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 23).

Stories that share “goodness” are ways that portraitists examine events and strength, acknowledge success in various settings, and share counter stories (Chapman, 2007, p. 160). Counter stories are a method of storytelling where the experiences of non-dominant groups of society are shared (Chapman, 2007). Portraitists conscientiously seek moments of strength, resilience, effort, and agency. “Studying goodness forces us to foreground the perspectives of our participants – What do they see as good? When they look around the world, what do they see that is worth celebrating?” (Bruhn & Jimenez, 2020, p. 50). Portraitists view the participants’ stories with a unique lens compared to other research forms that seek to identify and fix a problem or concern. As part of their research, portraitists acknowledge the difficulties and challenges their participants face and then document how they overcome conflicts and look for the positive (Cope, Brown & Hendricks, 2015). In addition to the search for the good, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe five other essential features of portraiture: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole.

Context

Understanding the context of experiences is essential to understanding what people say and do at a time, place, or situation. Context goes beyond the location of the story. It is not limited to setting and time. Still, it includes the complexity of situations related to “family, peer groups classroom, district, city, state and federal influences” while incorporating how the subject “perceives themselves and their reflections on their professional educational and personal experiences” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). How the subject views their role in the context of the story affects how they share their impact and becomes a reference point, and helps the portraitist understand how and why they made decisions to do what they did. Portraitists know that the participant’s experiences shape the “physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, and

aesthetic context of the world around them” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41).

Understanding the context of a situation is essential to building relationships and building understanding.

“As newcomer and stranger to the setting, the researcher inevitably experiences surprises: events, experiences, behaviors, and values that she had not anticipated, and to which she must adapt and respond” (Lawrence-Lightfoot Website, 2022). Meeting individuals and listening to their stories helps build a rapport and form a relationship. The goal of the portraitist is to document all the setting’s context as described by the participant, understanding that it is essential to understand how the participant experiences the world. Documenting the story and recording observational notes helps the portraitist be judicious when deciding on the information needed to shape the story’s context and identify the central themes.

Voice

The voice of the portraitist is always present in the portraits they create, even as they focus on their participants’ experiences. And at times, the portraitist’s voice is central during the interpretation of the participants’ stories. The researcher must be vigilant regarding how their voice shapes the story while ensuring the participant’s voice is spotlighted and present throughout, particularly highlighting how they overcame challenges (Dixson et al., 2005).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) envisioned portraiture as a way to “give voice to those who rarely get the chance to enter into conversation about schools” (p. 26). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), while there are six critical components to portraiture, voice is unique and is always present. There are six types of voice that a portrait artist can use in presenting their findings. These six voices overlap during the construction and presentation of the portrait. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) identified that these are voices as a witness, as interpretation, as

preoccupation, as autobiography, in dialogue, and to discern both voices (the participant and the researcher).

Through voice, the portraitist can bring the story to life. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state, “the portraitist’s voice is, then, everywhere – overarching and undergirding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors and echoing through the central themes” (p. 85). With the researcher’s voice being central and present throughout the research, the researcher acts as a witness in many cases. In a witness’s voice, the researcher describes situations and includes the details that the participants share while accurately representing their situation, allowing the researcher to communicate accurately to create their story.

Using the voice of interpretation, the researcher considers their position as the witness, as mentioned above, as they review documentation. The researcher begins to break down and navigate through the interpretations of the stories they have heard. As a researcher, my role is to help make sense of all the data collected to understand their stories. I do this by interpreting the data and communicating meaning and importance, adding to another piece of the puzzle full of rich information and descriptions.

Using the voice of preoccupation, the researcher organizes and begins to synthesize information that has been shared through interviews and transcripts. As a researcher, I bring what I know professionally and record the information that makes sense through my literature review. This voice is affected by my background knowledge, including my personal experience. The knowledge that I have of international education and teaching affects my perspective as a researcher, leading to the voice of autobiography.

Using the voice of autobiography, I reflect on my voice as a portraitist. My insight and values shape my interest and excitement about my chosen topic of study. Lawrence-Lightfoot

and Davis (1997) state, “The researcher, brings her history—familial, cultural, ideological and educational—to the inquiry;” however, the voice of autobiography should not overtake the voice of the interviewee and their perspective (p. 95). Personal perspectives are essential and should be used by the researcher to help make connections and understand the participant’s view and the voice they share in dialogue and help to continue constructing the puzzle that is the participant’s portrait.

Utilizing the voice in dialogue helps the researcher support how they give meaning to the interviews and any informal conversations with the participants. “Voice in dialogue is about the ongoing story construction that happens in the two-way interviews and multi-vocal conversations” (Chapman, 2005, p. 29). During the opportunities to talk to the participants, the researcher gains insightful information that further helps solidify an overall picture. Voices can vary within a story, so discerning voices is important.

The portrait highlights the participant’s voice giving their story life, emotion, and sound, allowing the reader to discern the voice of the writer and the participant. Using voice, the portraitist makes notations of behaviors and gestures that they see while trying to capture the whole picture. “When portraitists listen for voice, they seek it out, trying to capture its texture and cadence, exploring its meaning and transporting its sound and message into the text through carefully selected quotations” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 99). Using voices to discern other voices helps the researcher represent the meaning of gestures and body language as this story is shared.

Creating a portrait is complex; how the portraitist incorporates voice is an integral part of the portrait. When listening *for* the story, the researcher must understand the six-voice types.

Understanding voice is essential because, through voice, the researcher understands the participants' perspectives and can begin to document and interpret their stories.

Relationships

Portraits require meaningful relationships between the researcher and the participants. These relationships need to be treated with care and respect, as “it is through relationships between the portraitist and the actors that access is sought and given, and connections achieved” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135). According to Bruhn and Jimenez (2020), “Portraiture reminds us that a core of every research encounter is a complex set of relationships between people with different needs, desires, and motivations for engaging in the research” (p. 51). Relationships between the researcher and participant may be new and spontaneous or nurtured over time. For my study, I interviewed international educators and formed a relationship of trust in a short period. Participants shared their stories with me, signifying respect and understanding. Chapman (2007) explains, “The decisions made, the relationships formed, and the narratives representing people’s lives connect to the individuals’ past and present experiences sharing their stories with the researcher” (p. 158). Working collaboratively with the participants to construct portraits is a powerful way to relate to their experiences and learn about them as individuals and as a group by collecting data about similar experiences.

Emergent Themes

Through the formed relationship, the portraitist collects a variety of data. The researcher notices patterns which emerge in participants’ responses, crafting these into themes that they use to construct each participant’s written portrait. I discuss the role of themes more fully in the upcoming section on Data Analysis Strategies. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), “Emerging things arise out of this layering of data when different lenses frame similar

findings” (p. 204). The researcher is looking for convergence points during the research. These similar findings or repetitions in the data lead to identifying themes, contributing to the portrait’s aesthetic. As I noted earlier, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) write that the art of portraiture is a practice “that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism to capture the complexity, dynamics, and boundaries of human experience and organizational life” (p. xv). It brings together the data collection from qualitative research and the artist’s form of sharing data creatively.

Why Portraiture and the Role of the Portraitist

Portraiture is the best choice for my study as it allows me, as the researcher, to document the experiences of international teachers through richly detailed and creative storytelling. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) note that portraitists listen to both what participants share and what they remain quiet about: “What gets left out is as important as what is included – the blank spaces, the silences, also shape the form of the story” (p. 10). As an active participant in constructing my participants’ portraits, I asked questions, listened, and asked for more details when necessary to document their stories. Additionally, I sought feedback on the initial drafts of portraits to ensure that I captured their stories and noted any key details. Lightfoot (2009) notes, “Portraiture is creative in intent and encourages portraitists to use their own educational and life experiences as starting points for narrating participants’ stories” (p. 7). I have worked with international educators throughout my career and enjoy listening to and retelling stories they have shared with me, bringing my perspective to others’ stories. According to Chapman (2007), “In portraiture, the role of the researcher has a personal dimension that cannot be served from the research of professional interest or personal identity” (p. 158). It is the researcher who helps to shape the story. The researcher is central to qualitative research and portraiture methodology;

they guide and shape the narrative by collecting and interpreting the data while maintaining some level of objectivity (Chapman, 2007; English, 2000).

Aesthetic Whole

When the portraiture elements are combined—relationships, roles, emergent themes, and voice—the result is the product, the portrait as an aesthetic whole. In creating an aesthetic whole, the researcher takes all of the components mentioned above into account and finds balance by organizing the pieces to form a picture that tells their participants' stories. Lightfoot and Davis (1997) share portraits that are the result of a compilation of data from the interviews and observations, though many other portrait artists rely exclusively on conversations with participants. The researcher highlights significant themes in interviews that the participants share within the narrative.

During the interviews, I asked a range of questions to uncover some of what each teacher believes in and values. With the lifting of social distancing protocols, I held face-to-face interviews with participants, using a mixture of open-ended and closed questions to gather meaningful insight. Open-ended questions helped to make individuals feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences. I used closed-ended questions simply to gather factual background and demographic information such as their name, age, family status, and years of teaching experience abroad and in the U.S. I probed into responses as needed to gather additional information and enrich the interview information. "Probes are reminders to the researcher to ask for more information and to ask for the explanation of ideas" (Creswell, 2016, p. 131). Probing for more information was necessary to help me organize and craft portraits of each participant's experience.

Sample Population

For my research study, I selected three international teachers who work in public elementary schools in North Carolina. These three educators also currently work in global schools. I chose these individuals because of their willingness to participate in my study and support my interest in international teachers working at the elementary level in global schools. I recruited participants with at least 2 years of teaching experience in their home country and at least 2 years of experience teaching in public elementary schools in North Carolina. This level of experience is important because the participants have already established a foundational understanding of the teaching process in their own country before making a dramatic change to teaching in schools in the United States.

I have a personal passion for helping international educators navigate their transition into our school community. Chapman (2007) argues that this experience and passion are important: “a researcher connects to the participants through experiential knowledge and helps them understand and navigate their communities, schools, and professional lives” (p. 157). The international educators who I interviewed were recruited from countries around the world and had valuable experiences that I enjoyed documenting. My focus was on elementary educators whose first language was not English. In speaking with many international educators throughout my career, some have fairly similar experiences to American educators. Educators from English-speaking locales such as England, Scotland, Australia, and Canada, seem to have similar experiences to other educators who work in American schools. Based on my experiences with this population, I don’t think these educators have the same struggles that educators from non-English speaking countries have when navigating the nuances, slang, challenges of the English language, and being immersed in a new culture. It has been my experience that educators from

primarily English-speaking countries have similar experiences to their American counterparts. Thus, I drew my participants among non-native English-speaking educators in North Carolina teaching with a J-1 or H-B1 work visa and part of a “visitor exchange program” (Lambert & Lambert, 2019, p. 90). The schools where these educators work at are all global schools and currently hire international teachers to participate in a cultural exchange experience while teaching in North Carolina.

I interviewed three foreign-born teachers I name using pseudonyms to protect their identities: Josefina, Valentina, and Nayla. I interviewed each participant using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). I divided the interview guide into three broad sections which I cover in three different interviews to ensure that interviews were not too long or exhausting. Participants reflected on each of the previous interviews as part of the next interview. Each of the three interviews took about an hour. I met with them an additional time after they had read the completed portrait and could provide feedback.

I created a rich portrait detailing their personal stories as educators in U.S. public elementary schools using my collected information. Interviewing each individual international teacher several times allowed me to gather deep and personalized responses and information about their journey while navigating American society, professionally and personally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 127).

To recruit potential participants, I emailed international elementary school teachers in my district who work in global schools. As mentioned, I selected educators who had been teaching for at least 2 years in the U.S., so they had an opportunity to adjust to their new setting. I sent an email invitation and explained my study’s purpose, scope, and schedule to individuals who fit the participant profile (see Appendix B).

When potential participants expressed interest, I shared my study's purpose and explained the expectation that I would conduct three interviews with them as well as share their portrait for additional feedback. I selected the first three individuals who met the criteria and showed interest in participating in the study. After agreeing to participate in the study, I discussed and reviewed the IRB's process and documents and explained how I would keep their information confidential. The IRB process helps protect the participants and ensure they understand their privacy rights. Then I obtained their written consent to participate and let them know that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

Data Collection Methods

I interviewed each of the three teachers three times and used my data to form portraits of each participant. As a researcher, I am the primary instrument and the constant in the study. I used a semi-structured interview guide to organize the three conversations with each participant. I used the questions I created and revised after conducting my pilot study and additional probing questions depending on the answers. I recorded the interviews using Voice Memos and used the application Otter to transcribe them verbatim. During the interview, I took notes to identify any significant gestures or facial/body expressions that I thought could be valuable; however, I intentionally gave the interviewee my undivided attention and focus. When the interviews and transcriptions were complete, I reviewed and analyzed the data and looked for themes. During this process, I identified emotions and problems highlighted in my participants' stories and looked for how they discussed ways to navigate and conquer challenges. Cope, Jones, and Hendricks (2015) explains that within the aesthetic whole:

Focused attention is paid to the details of the participants' stories, what they say, how they say it, and the meaning of their words in the context of the holistic portrait.

Subsequently, threads of themes and other patterns running through all responses gradually build-up to the creation of the aesthetic whole that conveys the full reality of their reactions. (p. 12)

Each of the three interviews had a different focus: (1) background information, (2) the experience of transitioning into an American school and the challenges they faced, and (3) how they overcame many challenges and how their experience affected their hope for the future.

After each interview, I transcribed and reviewed each transcript to ensure that I had all of the information I needed to identify any follow-up questions for clarification. I interviewed each participant on different days as an organizational strategy to avoid crossing their stories by overlapping each participant's data, interviews, and experiences. I used the beginning of interviews two and three to review the transcripts of their previous interviews and to obtain any additional feedback or details they wanted to share after reading these transcripts. I retained the manuscript and annotated any needed corrections, updates, or clarifications. Soliciting and documenting their feedback helped me to ensure that the participants voices were central in the portraits.

In my fourth and final meeting with each participant, I asked them to review and comment on their portraits. Allowing them to read and reflect on their portraits and the process ensured I captured their story accurately and gave closure to the process. This step was essential for me to solicit feedback from my participants to add trustworthiness and ensure I captured accurate information; "if an account is inaccurate, then the researcher revises the themes to better portray the participants" (Creswell, 2016, p. 193). It was important that the portraits that I created resonated with my participants, as "the portraits stand as individual vignettes revealing recognizable themes and enabling patterns of experience to emerge from each topic being

studied” (Cope et al., 2015, p. 6). I wrote three individual portraits of international teachers to document their stories and describe their perspectives as individuals recruited to teach in North Carolina urban schools.

Data Analysis Strategies

Constructing a portrait from interview data is a challenging and highly creative process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Qualitative researchers understand the importance of organizing their data and asking a wide range of questions to uncover rich information. I collected data in the form of interviews, transcribed audio files, coded the data, and looked for themes. The process that I used for this was to identify repetitive words and emotions I noted in the transcripts of each international teacher as an individual, then analyze the data from the three participants side-by-side to see if there were any similarities and differences. I became proficient at coding, which assisted with my data analysis (Saldaña, 2015). Codes are words or short phrases that I used to identify chunks of data. I then noted overlapping codes and collapsed these into recurring categories. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) assert that “categories become prominent when codes are repetitive in research, and the researcher seeks to organize information to understand trends and categories” (p. 428).

Emergent themes grow out of the data gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and reflecting the information. “The data must be scrutinized, searching for the storyline that emerges from the material” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 10). There is never one single story, but multiple stories embedded within data. As a researcher, I realized I needed to be flexible and allow the interview process to follow a natural course allowing the participants to share their experiences which helped me discover their story.

Trustworthiness/Ethical Considerations

Ethical practices are essential in establishing trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure trustworthiness, I used three strategies: member checking, peer review, and maintaining a reflexivity journal. All researchers must be concerned with ethical practice and are responsible for ensuring trustworthy analyses. “Although policies, guidelines, and codes of ethics have been developed by the federal government, institutions, and professional associations, actual ethical practice comes down to the individual researchers’ values and ethics” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 261).

Member Checking

Member checking is a way to check the data collected directly with participants. According to Creswell (2016), “Member checking is when the researcher takes back to the participants their themes or entire stories and asks the participants whether the themes or stories are an accurate representation of what they said” (p. 192). Member checking helps validate, verify, or assess the data’s credibility and trustworthiness (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walther, 2016). I shared the participants’ transcripts with them after each interview as part of this process. I asked them to read their transcripts, and later their portrait, and comment on any issues, and fill in any gaps or clarify any information. Doing so helped ensure each participant was comfortable with the information they shared and accurately represented their story. Additional scholars explain that “member checking strengthens the credibility or legitimacy of the study by providing participants an opportunity to address and correct potential misrepresentations of their data” (Liu, 2020, p. 104). I shared the portraits I created with the interviewees and elicited their feedback to ensure I shaped their portraits accurately and captured their stories. I think the time I spent with them reviewing their portrait was one of my favorite

experiences in the process. Each participant was eager to see how I portrayed them and shared their story. In my meeting with Josefina, she raised some interesting thoughts that I captured in my reflexivity notebook:

In the meeting that I had where I reviewed the portrait with Josefina, she took the time to read the portrait. I assured her there was no rush. She talked about the time away from her husband and how hard it was to be apart from him. It helped me add a few details to her story about being apart from him. She also raised some interesting points about her transition and ways to make it easier for others to follow.

I wonder why there is no training for teachers before we come, you know to share a little bit about us? We are experienced teachers. I am not sure if the non-international teachers understand that. We simply come from different places and cultures.

I believe coming sooner before we are expected to start teaching may be helpful. It would give us time to get settled without all of the rushing. If I had felt more established personally, I might have felt better when I reported to work.

Member checking ensures that the study is trustworthy and that my portraits resonate with and ring true to my participants. Creswell (2016) states that the portraitist's goal is to accurately document and interpret the experiences. "If an account is inaccurate, then the researcher revises the themes to accurately portray the views of the participants" (p. 193). In response to the initial portrait of Josefina that I created, she offered additional information concerning the arrival of her husband and the impact it made on her experiences. A quality check is essential to good portraits; this is why I asked all participants to review and reflect on the brief portrait I created and shared in the first chapter of this dissertation as well as on the portrait I created of them.

Peer Review

In qualitative research, peer reviews improve the study and support the trustworthiness of findings. A peer reviewer is a person who has knowledge or expertise of the subject and critically reads and reviews the content of a document to improve the quality. One of the peer reviewers' goals is to keep the researcher honest; committee members also act as peer reviewers at the dissertation stage. The committee provides written and verbal feedback throughout the dissertation writing process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, "such an examination or review can also be conducted by either a colleague familiar with the research or one new to the topic" (p. 249). I solicited two individuals to serve as peer reviewers to help me talk through my initial findings as I organized and constructed my portraits. One of my reviewers is a doctoral candidate and currently serves as the principal of a global school that works with international teachers; I refer to them as reviewer one. This person frequently asked challenging questions that helped me consider different perspectives. For example, they helped me to think more deeply about the notion of trust. They offered, "Yes, they must extend trust—even when their natural instincts might say not to trust anyone in a new country, a strange place, unknown culture, unknown 'rules' of the community."

Reviewer two was a retired teacher who has worked with international teachers during her career. She also has expertise in writing thus, in addition to the content, this reviewer also helped proofread my paper with the hope of improving the overall quality of my dissertation. She shared the following with me: "Again, I love how you organize this by laying it out and then focusing on each in subsequent paragraphs, try to incorporate some quotes, and it will strengthen your sections in your methodology." She also helped me to think about the quality of the quotes I selected and whether they illustrated the claims I was making.

Reflexivity

Previously I mentioned that I maintained a professional journal to record events and interactions throughout my educational career and frequently use a journal to recall situations I have encountered as a teacher and administrator. It only made logical sense that I continued this practice throughout my dissertation. I used a reflexivity journal as a third strategy to ensure trustworthiness. Using a reflexivity journal helped me recall moments and insights after the interviews and construct my portraits. A reflexivity journal is not merely a summary of information or an event. Creswell (2016) states that “in a good qualitative study, you should write about the biases, values, and experiences you bring to a study as well as how the study may affect the participants and readers” (p. 223). After each interview, I documented my thoughts and initial interpretations, questions, and insights in my reflexivity journal. What follows is an example that I wrote in my reflexivity journal after meeting with Nayla:

She gently nodded while she read the portrait and said she saw herself in the words I wrote. I have to admit that I felt really good about that, but I felt like I was saying goodbye to a friend, someone that I would only see again in the portrait. We talked about the beginning of her journey and how long ago it seems, she learned so much. We talked about how hard it will be to leave a place that has become home but continuing with the positive mindset that she had all along, there was still more to learn and new adventures to have. I think about myself as I finish up my dissertation and possibly a career in public schools. It is not an ending but a beginning.

Limitations

This research study offers insights from my personal experience working with international educators and my systematic data collection with three participants. As with all

research studies, there are limitations, or shortcomings, with this research. The major limitation is that I only profile three participants who work in unique settings – global schools in central North Carolina. Their experiences may differ from international teachers who work in other parts of the country, at other schools, or with older children (in middle or high schools). Portraits are unique and not easily generalizable. Would educators from other school districts or states have similar accounts? Would international educators recruited from different areas of the world hold similar accounts? All the international teachers in my study were recruited to teach in public schools in central North Carolina. Would international teachers working in other parts of the U.S. have similar experiences navigating their school and school communities? Am I assuming that all international educators experience culture shock? These are some of the questions that help point to the limitations of my analysis.

Reporting the Data and Conclusions

I report the findings as portraits in the next three chapters, one chapter for each international teacher. In the concluding chapter, I read across these portraits for recurring themes and then put them back into conversation with the literature. I share some conclusions, discuss the implications of my study for educational practice, make suggestions for additional research, and conclude with personal reflections about the dissertation process.

CHAPTER IV: PORTRAIT OF JOSEFINA, INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR FROM COLOMBIA

When you have a good experience as an international teacher, the other country becomes a second home, and then you know you made a good decision. When you make a good group of friends at work, they help you like your job. It allows you to feel like you belong.

Josefina Perez is from the north-central region of Bucaramanga, Colombia. She describes her country as warm and green. Josefina lived in the city where there were many things to do and see that were reflections of her rich Colombian culture, including music, food, museums, and parks. She lived an active life and walked everywhere. Many places to see in her country reflected her Colombian history. She could walk or ride public transportation; the picturesque Andes Mountains surrounded her city.

Josefina met with me in a conference room at her school. She chose to meet with me face-to-face as she felt it was more personable than our initially scheduled video conference. Her shoulder-length black hair was pulled back into a braided ponytail. She wore a pale yellow short-sleeved t-shirt and light blue jeans. On her wrist, she had several bracelets. One of them was made of thread and displayed the colors of the Colombian flag (yellow, blue, and red). She was soft-spoken and articulate. Josefina listened attentively and wanted to make sure that she answered each question. She had a warm and gentle demeanor.

Josefina enrolled in her first year at a university in Colombia, where she met teachers who worked abroad. These meetings sparked her interest in becoming an international teacher. While enrolled at the university in Colombia, she met someone who worked in America as an international teacher. In her early 20's, Josefina was young and single and craved adventure and

new experiences outside of her community. She was very independent and always trusted her instincts. She enjoyed speaking with the teacher and learning about their experiences in American classrooms. After speaking with the international teacher, Josefina impulsively applied to a program that she found online. The company rejected her because she lacked teaching experience, had not completed her course of study, and needed to improve her skills to communicate in English. Josefina diligently worked to complete her studies and obtained her bachelor's degree.

Josefina earned her license to teach Spanish in grades Kindergarten-12th. She then took a kindergarten teaching position with the Colombian government. She was excited to provide instruction in her native language of Spanish, which she loved and felt confident in. As part of her degree, she took courses to learn English and then teach English as a Second Language. She was thrilled to apply for her first teaching experience in Colombia in Kindergarten as the lead teacher for five years before accepting an international teaching position.

She loved working with students and helping them learn to read and write in the language she loved. Before moving to the states to teach, Josefina was a relatively new teacher enticed by the possibility of exploring new places and cultures. She was persistent and continued to research organizations recruiting Colombian teachers to work and fill Spanish teaching positions in American schools. In order to improve her English, Josefina decided to reapply to a recruiting organization that she had researched. Excited to explore opportunities outside of Colombian schools, she applied for a program that allowed her to teach Spanish.

I was looking into teaching abroad. A friend told me there is a way to teach Spanish in America. I was like, yes, this is what I want to do. I knew Spanish; I was fluent in Spanish. I was not confident in my skills in English, I didn't think I could teach English

and didn't want to do ESL. I am comfortable with the Spanish language and how and what to teach. Teaching in Spanish would be a dream come true.

Josefina applied once again. She was rejected because she did not have a valid driver's license. An additional rejection was a very discouraging time for Josefina. She felt she had done what she needed to do to be successful. She decided that she would be content to teach in the country and community Josefina loved and put aside any dream she had to travel. Then she met the man (Enrique) that would one day become her husband. He encouraged her to go after her dream, and with him by her side, she knew she could succeed.

Every Journey Starts with A Plan

Becoming an international teacher was an arduous process for Josefina. Organizations are very selective about who they recruit and what skills they want them to have. Again, Josefina was rejected one more time because she did not have the credentials to drive. She didn't own a car or need to drive one in her Colombian community since it has an extensive transportation system. The organization explained to her, "Driving is essential in rural areas. There is no public transportation system, and many positions are in rural communities." Frustrated, Josefina couldn't understand why this was so hard. After the rejection, she said regretfully. "After I applied twice and was rejected, I was like, this is not for me. I just quit trying, and I got married."

Josefina's husband, Enrique, knew of her love of adventure and exploring new places. She talked to Enrique about exploring teaching positions in Asia. She thought applying for a different international teaching position may be a more straightforward process than applying for jobs in the U.S. Josefina spoke to her husband about the possibility of moving to China. She said his answer was a firm "no" without pause or hesitation. Enrique believed that if his wife were

going to be successful, she needed to pursue positions that would take them to the United States. He understood that being fluent in English was essential to communicate effectively in American culture, and he also knew she had learned English in school. Josefina always considered her husband's perspective. If Enrique didn't support her decision, she wouldn't proceed. Josefina needed a sign from him. Any move would be a challenge for him.

It was very hard for him to, you know, leave Colombia knowing that he would come without a job. I was the one that had a job. We talked about how much I wanted the experience and how much it meant to me. I said I would not do it if he didn't want to. I don't wish to take two different paths. But I told him that I would appreciate it if he supported my dream.

The decision to proceed would be theirs as a couple, and she valued his insight. He was supportive, he could see them learning together in the states, but China was overwhelming for him. He wanted her to seek an opportunity in an English-speaking county. She knew if their decision was not in sync, there was the possibility that they may separate. She didn't want to risk losing him. He was her biggest supporter. They saved enough money and purchased a car, a luxury in Colombia. She decided to apply for a teaching position again.

Josefina finally checked all of the boxes: she spoke English, had experience, and now had a driver's license. She once again reviewed the companies that recruited international teachers. She researched trusted companies with whom others in her network had had positive experiences. She met other teachers pursuing international teaching experiences in college and learned from their expertise, suggestions, and guidance.

Josefina was confident that she could speak English and communicate with the recruiters fluently during the interview process. She participated in a phone interview, presented a lesson

she had created, and received positive feedback. She made a video that explained why she wanted to become an international teacher and her reasons for seeking an international experience. Josefina wanted to learn and teach in another culture. She wanted to have an adventure. She was offered and accepted a position to teach in the piedmont region of North Carolina.

Excitement Builds

Josefina and Enrique were ready to start their new life in America. She had decisions to make, but nothing would hold her back after so many setbacks. The organization presented her with many teaching positions in North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina. She decided on a job in a Spanish immersion classroom in the Piedmont region of North Carolina because she had made friends with other educators who worked in the area. She was incredibly excited to start this new chapter in her life and was ready to experience adventure. She eagerly embraced the opportunity. Josefina knew she would learn so much by being immersed in American culture and was excited about improving her English. Josefina believed that participating in an international exchange program would help her develop her teaching techniques. Moving to the states would be different from her daily life in Colombia, but at the time, she couldn't get there fast enough.

Josefina and Enrique put their personal belongings in storage. They packed their suitcases, and they boarded a plane to North Carolina. After what felt like a lifetime on a plane, she arrived in North Carolina. Upon arrival, she was greeted by members of the recruitment agency who whisked her away to a hotel with other newly hired international teachers.

After all of the struggles, I did it! The process was tough, but I did it! I was on my way to, you know, finally becoming a homeroom teacher. I didn't know what would happen next, but I was here in North Carolina, ready for a new experience, my adventure.

She would stay at the hotel for several days with her husband. At the hotel, she received what she described as some professional development. During her meetings, she learned about the assimilation process and what she would need to do to obtain her essentials before reporting to her position, such as setting up a bank account, finding a place to live, getting an American driver's license, and purchasing a car. She admittedly felt the process was a bit overwhelming but exciting. Information continuously came at her, and she had information overload. She was grateful to have her husband there to support her, and she was thankful for the new relationships with other educators navigating this unique experience. The recruiting organization drove her to her assigned school when the professional development was complete. Her initial experience would be to serve as a co-teacher to learn the ropes.

That same day, they dropped me off at the office. I had my luggage with me and all of my things. They left me there, and I left my bags in the office. Someone from the school greeted me, and they showed me around the school and took me to my room. Everything happened very fast.

Josefina was greeted by an assigned local advisor, an international teacher who had navigated the transition from teaching abroad to teaching in an American school. She was relieved to have someone who could help her get oriented in the school community and answer questions. The local advisor introduced her to individuals she could look to for support and introduced her to her cooperating teacher. The advisor and her co-teacher helped her understand the school system's fundamental aspects and policies. She said, "All of the information, it's very overwhelming, and all I wanted to do was teach." Having the support made a difference for Josefina. She expressed gratitude for her time with her local advisor and referred to her as her "hero."

My first role was as a co-teacher. I was not the lead teacher I had always dreamed of. I was helping the teacher who was in charge. That was a good thing for me because I was not responsible for everything, but my co-teacher was amazing. She was from Costa Rica, and we got along very well.

Josefina worked with her co-teacher in the weeks to come. She appreciated her perspective as an international teacher, who understood her as she navigated her new role. She enjoyed being the assistant and learning about how American classrooms worked. She knew from the experience that it wasn't as stressful as being accountable for all of the instructional decisions related to being the lead teacher. She took the time to settle into the learning environment and found going to work less stressful than being at home. She enjoyed her work with students, and when an opportunity to take a position as the lead teacher opened up, Josefina accepted it. An elementary school with a new immersion program hired her as the lead teacher in a kindergarten Spanish immersion classroom. For the first few months, she was ecstatic with the newness and excitement of learning in a new place. However, this was short-lived.

After the first six months, I had an experience with some things at school that were not so nice. I found meetings overwhelming and had a problem with a staff member. And I was like, I don't think this is how this should be. I decided that I didn't want to do this anymore. I was having a rough time with things at school and outside of school. I had some problems.

Josefina seemed to be adjusting to the school environment but was overwhelmed by things outside of school. Financial struggles overwhelmed the young couple, and Josefina worried her husband would blame her for their problems. She expressed regret for getting him into this situation and convincing him to move. She wanted to quit and return to her Colombian

classroom. Enrique reassured her they would be fine and reminded her that they could do anything as long as they had each other. Despite his reassurances, Josefina cried frequently and expressed deep remorse over her decision to move far from her home. Her sadness spilled over into the classroom, and she began to note difficult things for her at school, which she believed caused her to have struggled with meetings, planning, resources, and relationships.

Disenchantment

Josefina supported her cooperating teacher, instructional team, and administrator as she moved into her lead teacher position. She had the knowledge she gained at the university and her experience as a co-teacher in teaching students Spanish. She taught in a large elementary school that was beginning an immersion program. At that time, the immersion program was only for the Kindergarten class. However, each school would add another grade level.

When I first arrived at my American school, I felt like I was starting again, like a first-year teacher. Nothing seemed to go right for me in my classroom. I was an experienced teacher, but I had to relearn everything.

Even though Josefina had people around her who offered her support, she was often hesitant to ask for any assistance. She believed that she had to prove that she could make the program successful. She understood schools and programs were different, but with the stress of what was happening outside of school, she became increasingly frustrated with situations at school, which included the structures that were provided to support her students, including behavior management and other supports.

Students

After the first few months, Josefina was concerned with the students' behavior, and her initially quiet students were much more talkative and active. She anticipated the students being

social, and it was very appropriate in Colombia to allow students to be chatty, but they were so loud and didn't follow directions. Some students' behaviors and attitudes were unfamiliar to her. These behaviors did not reflect the level of respect that she was accustomed to in her country. She said, "I don't know if they were just getting used to me or if I was getting used to them, but they changed." Discipline and behavior differed from what Josefina was accustomed to with her co-teaching and time in her Colombian classroom. She found the students did not share the level of respect she had once received.

The students in my school were very different from the students I worked with while in Colombia. When I first arrived, I thought the children were very quiet. And I was like, wow, these kids listen, and they pay attention. I was impressed to listen to them in Spanish. I was amazed by the students, the program, and how it worked.

Josefina felt that the expectations for students in her school were different than those in Colombia. There were many rules and expectations for student's behavior, and she was accustomed to students being more social, which helped the development of student language. She was overwhelmed by all of the rules that impacted her and her students, and she felt like if her class was not behaving like the other classes, she was worried about what others would say. She became self-conscious but knew if students were going to succeed, they would require time for active conversation and creativity.

[In Colombia] we are laid back and do not have many transitions. We don't worry about students being quiet all of the time. Here students are expected to be silent in the halls, but in Colombia, it is the time when you get to see your friend and say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' It's a social time whenever you transition to another place. So, it is the time

when it is good to see each other. It was hard, learning to learn new expectations. That was very different. I was not prepared for that because the concept is different here.

To improve student behavior, Josefina consulted with members of her team and her administrators, and they encouraged her to reach out to parents for support. There was a high level of parent involvement at her school, and she had been so focused on setting up the structure of her classroom and her students' behavior she had not actively recruited help. Parent conferences and contacts frequently happened at her school. Although she was self-conscious about speaking in English to her parents, she followed through with the suggestions she received, and her students' parents were both welcoming and responsive. She organized conferences with the parents of each student, and she grew more confident with each meeting. She started incorporating parent support which dramatically improved the behavior of students and the climate of her classroom.

Josefina knew that student behavior and engagement were critical to the improved climate of her classroom. Josefina knew she needed to plan creative and structured lessons if she was going to meet schoolwide expectations and actively engage her students. Her students needed opportunities to communicate and practice Spanish for her program to succeed. She talked to her local advisor about ways to incorporate more opportunities for student conversation, which, in the end, happened naturally.

Meetings

Initially, Josefina struggled with various meetings that teachers were required to attend. Staff and other team meetings were held to teach her about the school and district expectations. Attending meetings was very important to Josefina. However, she found it overwhelming. Each meeting was brisk and full of new information, and she worked to absorb all of it. She was also

practicing her English skills while working in a fast-paced environment. She learned how to process large amounts of information and improve her English skills in an authentic school environment. It always seemed that the staff was motivated after each meeting while she was just trying to unpack the information into manageable chunks.

Josefina attended teacher planning meetings to better prepare for her students' various instructional needs and to learn how to design lessons using the curriculum and programmatic needs of the language immersion program.

In meetings, I learned so many things. I was responsible for everything, such as completing paperwork, grades, communicating with parents, student instruction. I felt very overwhelmed. And especially the staff meetings. Like, I couldn't understand most of the things they were saying, because they were talking using acronyms all of the time.

Admittedly, she understood that the school's expectation was that to meet the immediate needs of students, instruction was differentiated according to their academic level and then presented in small groups where students could receive direct support and feedback. Small group teaching was a new instructional practice for Josefina, and she was trained to deliver lessons to whole groups. Class sizes in Colombia were larger, and the whole-group presentation was more manageable and required less planning. Not wanting to be viewed as unwilling or defiant for not presenting lessons using the preferred method, she poured most of her time into planning. She worked many hours and frequently questioned, "How am I going to do this?" She felt all of the time she spent planning was overwhelming. She spent hours writing detailed plans for a lesson that might take 20 minutes to present. She understood that small group instruction was a schoolwide expectation, and there was research to support it was best for her students, but she found the time planning didn't make sense.

As time progressed, planning lessons for small group instruction and attending staff meetings continued to be stressful. Josefina made sure that she listened attentively during staff meetings and took detailed notes to review them afterward when she needed to.

From teaching in Colombia and my studies, I thought I knew more about the education system here and how planning works. In the beginning, planning a small group lesson was a challenge for me because we didn't do small group instruction there.

She couldn't understand why the planning piece was so time-consuming. Even though she understood the curriculum and how instruction worked in Colombia, she felt disconnected. Josefina needed to balance her planning time and prepare for teaching. She took to studying and learning the new curriculum and the expectations of her new school. Initially, she did not feel supported by anyone at her school, and admittedly, she did not ask for help from anyone. She believed that her grade-level team, who taught in the traditional English model, thought, "You're a teacher; show what you know."

Josefina felt equipped and confident to share her teaching knowledge before leaving Colombia but quickly learned that her idealized dream of teaching and the reality of her experience were different. Josefina continued to struggle. She felt that a team member was mistreating her, and she wasn't sure why or what caused the conflict between them. She experienced microaggressions or what she described as "unkind events." One of the other teachers on her team would insinuate that she could not easily understand her and would conveniently forget to share information with her. Josefina was already self-conscious of her accent and English but believed that she did not have a problem with anyone else. She knew she would have to confront the teacher. She needed to take control of the situation if she was going to be successful.

Taking Control

Josefina spent significant time unpacking the information she was obtaining at meetings. Unpacking all the information was time-consuming and frequently took away from her activities outside of school. She spoke to other international teachers who worked in the program and her advisor to see how they handled planning. They were happy to support her and suggested talking to the school's instruction coach, a teacher support position. She looked to the instructional coach for help. The instructional coach's role was to coordinate with her kindergarten team to support them with strategies to support their students during targeted instruction. She also planned small group sessions with Josefina and her peers. The instructional coach knew the curriculum and had expertise in planning and presenting lessons. The instructional coach coordinated sessions with Josefina, where she modeled small group literacy lessons. Josefina discovered the organization and the language was different but appreciated learning new practices to individualize instruction. Josefina found the coach's strategies helpful and easily adaptable to her Spanish class lesson. With her help and practice, she became confident in presenting small group lessons and motivated to share her knowledge.

Josefina confided in her instructional coach about her struggles, who helped her get support and intervention from the school administration. The administrative team respected her decision to handle the situation so that she felt comfortable. Josefina decided to confront the teacher, who had no difficulty understanding her. She shared with the teacher her educational background and expertise. Josefina felt great pride when sharing her story, how the uncomfortable experience made her think, and what she learned.

Feeling prepared to teach her students gave Josefina the knowledge and confidence to feel effective. She was able to plan engaging lessons to assist the growth of her students' Spanish

language and also improved their behavior because their ability to understand her improved dramatically. Frequently, she would reflect on the teaching situation she had before coming to the U.S., which made her long for home and the students she taught in Colombia. However, she had so many resources readily at her fingertips in her American school. These were resources that were not abundant or readily available in Colombia, and she pondered how her experience in the U.S. could benefit the children abroad.

I work in a community where it is not unusual for students to travel. Children do not know how lucky they are, how privileged. Students here seem like they have everything. I do not know if they appreciate it. In Columbia, we share things or pictures to see the world and understand.

Josefina was grateful that the school she worked in had multiple resources, including smartboards, computers, and lots of books and manipulatives for the children to use. Conversely, she was also frustrated with the lack of resources her Colombian students had access to.

Unlike some schools in Colombia, we have access to many things here. In my previous school, teachers had one smartboard to share with the whole school. The smartboard will be in one room where students come and take turns watching a lesson. They didn't have computers for every student, and students took turns. We have so much here. I don't think you know or understand unless you come from another place or have seen it yourself.

She wanted to help her children from her community back home, but she wasn't sure how. Schools here seemed to have such an abundance. She even researched ways to send discarded books to help students, but the expense was too great. She reached out to her school community and shared that students who do not have instructional materials would feel

frustrated with the waste. “We do not have the luxury of throwing away books. I collected the books, and with my help, I was able to ship some books to Colombia. It was costly.” Josefina hoped that her small donation made a difference. Because of that experience, she actively sought out other opportunities to help children in communities without instructional resources and teach children about the world outside of her small NC classroom, a practice she incorporated into her classroom lessons throughout her teaching commitment.

She worked with staff and community members to adopt a school in South Africa. Some of the students in her class were already traveling to help a community school in South Africa by helping dig a well to have fresh drinking water. Josefina heard that there was a need for instructional materials. She worked with some students in her school community, and she began a campaign to provide pens and pencils to the school. The students took the materials and shared pictures of their experiences when they were delivered. She was shocked by the poverty and conditions that the students learned in, such as buildings with no electricity, dirt floors, and other extremely poor learning conditions.

I think when you see poverty, you understand. When you know you can make a difference, you should. The children were shocked when they looked at the pictures of other kids and their school. There was no light. There was no way to check the internet or phones or anything. The kids were surprised to learn about the conditions of schools in other places.

Josefina shared how much she appreciated the empathy that she felt from her students. It made her feel good to know she was making a difference and sharing her passion with her students. These situations helped her connect to her students by giving them opportunities to

learn about the world beyond their classrooms, giving them insight into problems being faced across the globe.

Josefina enjoyed the feeling she gained from helping the students in other parts of the world. She found that helping make a difference was an opportunity to develop her teaching skills further. She decided to enroll in a master's degree program. Completing her master's program gave Josefina more teaching tools and knowledge. Gaining new teaching strategies gave her confidence and a better perspective about student challenges and ways to approach these challenges. When she completed her program, she received a significant boost in her self-esteem. She used her newfound confidence and knowledge to become a local advisor to support other teachers. She understood how it felt to walk in their shoes.

I understand what I'm teaching, the curriculum, and what teachers discuss in meetings. I know how it works. If I can do it, you can do it. And share with them that it's okay to ask for help. Because if you don't ask, you don't know the answers, and they don't know either. I learned so many skills. I knew I could teach other teachers; I could be a leader.

Working with others helped Josefina in her assimilation into the school community. She was the first teacher hired at her school to establish herself as an international immersion teacher. Each time she struggled or had a problem, she formed supportive relationships that helped her learn ways to navigate the challenges. The people who supported her in her struggle were the keys to her success. She learned to listen to and heed her grade level team's advice as coworkers empathized with her and offered their perspectives, which she valued. She remained on the same grade-level team for two years before desiring another experience and moving from kindergarten to the fifth grade. She used the knowledge she gained during her first two years to help her, making the switch with confidence. She valued her relationships with her team and instructional

coach and expressed they were more than coworkers, more than friends. They were family. Each year that she taught at the school, more international staff was hired to teach at the global school. Several international teachers were required to teach in her school for two years.

Josefina had formed relationships with so many people at school. However, the relationship she had with Enrique kept her focused and grounded. He was always a source of positive energy and encouragement. She spoke about him frequently and always with a smile and affection. During their stay, he found a job teaching and recording music. She was proud that her husband found a position in something that he enjoyed, something for him. Enrique's new job gave him enjoyment, and she was able to see that he needed to feel fulfilled. She had navigated so many challenges with him at her side, and she was happy to support him in his dreams.

When her commitment to the school ended, she was concerned about their future, but this opportunity allowed her to stay and continue teaching in an environment she loved. She knew it was not a typical situation, but she had grown to love her school community.

I finished my master's. I knew it was time to go back to Colombia. My commitment had ended even though we wanted to stay a little longer. Enrique was offered a sponsored position to remain in the states and become a resident. It was like a dream come true. Josefina reflected on her original feelings as an international teacher.

If I could go back to my first year, I would reassure myself. It will be okay. You are going to figure it out. You can do it! It is going to be hard, and at times you are not going to know what to do; it will be okay. You are going to learn from your mistakes and challenges.

Learning is what helped Josefina. She felt as if she was prepared for the transition to teaching in the U.S. and the challenges. Despite her research, she could not prepare for the

unknown, but people wanted to help her through her challenges. The relationships she made along the way mattered, and she learned that asking for help doesn't make you look weak. It makes you look like you want to learn. As she noted, not understanding everything or having all the answers when you are new "is not the end of the world." Josefina felt that international teachers "hesitate to ask for help because we are not used to asking, or it makes you look weak, or it makes you look like you cannot do it and you are not up to the challenge." Alternatively, she learned it means that you are "human." Overcoming these challenges gave her strength and confidence.

You need to trust the people who support you: your friends, your grade level, and the faculty. You need to feel like they have your back and that it will be fine. That is part of the journey. That is part of the adventure. And you will learn from the difficult times. You will be stronger than when you came. The struggles, you know, it's just part of the journey.

A Portrait of Trust

One of the key lessons Josefina learned as an international teacher is the importance of trusting others. When traveling or having a new experience, it is perfectly normal to feel anxious, uneasy, and cautious until you know where you feel safe and supported. Feeling vulnerable until you can build trusting relationships was important for Josefina personally and professionally. Once Josefina established herself at school, she became confident and formed trusting relationships.

CHAPTER V: PORTRAIT OF VALENTINA, INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR FROM COLOMBIA

I love being an international teacher and making connections to others. Here I get to interact with so many culturally diverse people. I work at a global school. In my school, I learn about many different cultures. I have made friends with people from England, Scotland, Australia, Spain and, of course, here. It has its challenges but is a great adventure.

Valentina is from Armenia, a rural part of the western region of Colombia, where she was born and raised. She describes her native country as both tropical and beautiful. Armenia has an environment that contains lush fauna and flora, including tropical forests. She is from the Coffee Triangle, a region primarily known for its coffee, producing a rich harvest of coffee beans and other agricultural exports such as sugar cane and plantains. Her home is not known as a significant travel destination but is abundant with Colombian culture and music. She exudes pride when speaking about her heritage and shares her thoughts with bubbly energy and expression. She has a thick accent which she says has been challenging at times, and she speaks very fast. She has long, straight black hair, with a red blossom in her hair and a broad smile.

Valentina describes her familia (family) as very large; she has eight siblings, five sisters, and three brothers. She was born in Colombia. Growing up in a rural section of Armenia, her mother worked as a homemaker, and her father was a farmer. Her parents are the center of her family. She speaks of her family with a huge smile and frequently talks about how they are very close, especially her mother; she often touches her heart when she mentions her. Her family frequently gathers to celebrate all occasions. She describes her family as “big,” including an extensive network of cousins, aunts, and uncles. Traditions are important to her, and being a part

of family events helps keep her family close; she mentioned, “in Colombia, we spend a lot of time together.” Regretfully, she has not been able to not travel home for several years due to travel restrictions and the COVID-19 pandemic. This time without her family has been difficult, but she said phone calls and video chats have helped.

Valentina always knew that she wanted to teach. She remembers always trying to help her mother with her siblings, playing at school, and sharing with others.

Since I was a little girl, I have loved playing with my siblings, and I was always the teacher. When I started middle school, I realized that I could become a teacher. I helped my classmates when they were having difficulty understanding math concepts. I realized I was good at it. The high school I attended specializes in educating teachers, so I started working toward being a teacher in the ninth grade.

She realized she was good at helping others and had a gift for learning languages.

Valentina is determined to learn as many languages as she can. Valentina is fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English. However, she prefers to communicate in Spanish, the language in which she is most comfortable. Valentina focused all of her attention on becoming a teacher in high school. She enrolled in a career-focused program called Superior. In the program, she worked closely with her teachers to listen and learn about what it takes to become a teacher. This experience confirmed that teaching would be her profession and passion. “When I was back home, I enrolled in a school for teachers called Superior. At Superior, you learn about careers in teaching and pedagogy.” In the eleventh and twelfth grades, she worked with a mentor teacher and students as a student-teacher. She focused on an additional two extra years to earn her teaching certificate. Her English teacher recognized her gift for language. When she finished

Superior, Valentina obtained her Bachelor's Degree from a university in Colombia in Modern Languages, and she received a license to teach kindergarten through twelfth-grade Spanish.

She proudly described her experience working for the Colombian government as an educator in rural settings. She was able to live close to her family and teach. In Colombia, she had experience working with indigenous people from rural areas. In her first-year of teaching, she worked in a small school where she taught students in multiple grades in the same classroom, regardless of age. The students spoke Spanish and other dialects spoken by the indigenous people, which at times was challenging, but she had a gift for languages. She embraced the challenge. She was also deeply saddened by the experience, describing the poverty she witnessed in her community. She hoped her teaching made a positive impact on the students and community.

In my first years, I walked to work at a small rural school in the country an hour and a half from my hometown, and sometimes I would ride my bicycle. I was the only teacher, just me. The students spoke Spanish and multiple dialects. The students used to come to school barefoot. So much poverty, they were extremely poor, but they came to school, with no shoes or snacks. I would ride my bicycle to the school with many bags packed with items for the children. I used to get donations and bring them things, shoes, clothes, and school supplies. My job there wasn't easy, but I learned a lot, and so did they.

She expressed concern that the children needed material things, school supplies, and somebody to care for them. She was concerned about the lack of stability in their lives because they grew up in remote locations with migrant workers who harvested coffee and then moved on to the next job for three or four months. Then they rotated. She was concerned about her students' type of life if they only knew about migrant farming. She wanted her students to

understand there were many opportunities outside of the familiar. She wanted them to persevere and experience a better life. Personally, Valentina believed that she needed to consider a world outside of her comfort zone but wasn't sure what that may look like.

Every Trip Begins With A Plan

Valentina is highly driven and loves to learn. She was determined to make her dreams her reality. She embraced learning opportunities and networked with other teachers in similar situations after school. Working as an educator for the Colombian government allowed her access to various opportunities to grow in her profession. The school day in the area she worked had an abbreviated schedule; therefore, she had time for professional learning opportunities. These opportunities showed her ways to improve her teaching skills and network with educators who shared common interests. She understood that developing her knowledge and understanding of how students learned would help her address and support the unique learning challenges of her students in migrant communities.

Valentina chose to sign up for a professional learning opportunity with a friend. The session focused on reading and was taught by a teacher who had just returned from teaching in the United States. The teacher shared his literacy knowledge and supported the students in small learning centers during the lessons. The teacher shared his perspective of teaching in American schools and how being an international teacher impacted him personally during the presentation. She listened to his story attentively, especially his experiences teaching Spanish and English. Valentina said, "I like working with language. Maybe I can do it too. However, I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it." She was very close to her family and didn't think she could leave them; how could she leave her mother? She enjoyed listening to his experiences but thought about how it may impact her and her family if she went overseas.

Valentina was young, single, and craved a new opportunity. She describes herself as fun and adventurous. She had heard about teachers who taught in other countries, but this was the first one she had ever met who had first-hand experience teaching abroad. She actively listened to other teachers who shared their experiences about teaching in the southern states. Valentina found herself drawn into the stories. Valentina desired to learn more about the teachers' experiences in America. She knew teaching in the states would be a considerable change. However, Valentina was confident that leaving Colombia would help her gain knowledge to share with her students, especially when she returned. She believed that she could acquire the ability to motivate her students to seek experiences outside their rural communities by teaching abroad. Her knowledge of the United States was limited and came primarily from the movies and magazines. She started researching the process and requirements to teach in American schools with a friend. She didn't want to jump into anything. "It was difficult, with so many requirements." Valentina and her friend looked into the organization that a fellow teacher recommended.

I wasn't entirely sure that I wanted to apply, but I was excited about the opportunity. I loved my teaching position with the Colombian government, and I was in my comfort zone. I ultimately decided [to apply] because my best friend applied, and she told me it was a great experience to grow. I was comforted knowing I would have a friend doing it with me. But I just wasn't 100% sure I wanted to do it. I did that just in case.

Excitement Builds

The process of becoming an international teacher was competitive and complex. The paperwork and countless interviews seemed overwhelming and even a bit intimidating. She found that the recruiting agency shared information and answered all her questions. She

researched life in the United States because she wanted to understand how life may be different (misconceptions) than she imagined compared to the mythology she had heard about the U.S. She had always heard there was great wealth in the United States, and she needed to understand what she was getting into and how it may affect her when she arrived. She understood culture shock and felt being prepared would help her avoid or cope with the negative effects.

Despite her experience with learning English at the University, Valentina still questioned her ability to speak fluent American English, but she was successful during the interview process. Each success in the process gave her more and more confidence. She received an invitation to Bogota, where Valentina met American principals working with the organization. She designed lessons that she would share. Despite being “super nervous,” she made it through the process and was offered a co-teaching job near the Carolina coast, which she described with a huge smile.

Valentina arrived in North Carolina with seven years of teaching experience. She had one suitcase and a friend. Excited about her new position, she was ready to begin a new chapter in her life teaching in an American school. She was disappointed that her friend was hired by a different county in North Carolina, about 45 minutes away, but she still felt confident about her decision as long as she knew her friend was nearby. It wasn't that far; they were in the same state. She described the experience as suitable for her, and she was happy. Everything was new and exciting. Being busy, however, did not stop her from missing her family.

Valentina continued to work within the large district for around four months. She threw herself into learning about her role as a co-teacher. Valentina enjoyed working alongside her collaborating teacher, who had experience and energy. The teacher was happy to share her expertise. Opportunities to collaborate with her co-teacher gave Valentina a fundamental

understanding of lesson planning and strategies for behavior management, both areas she had prior knowledge in, but Valentina always welcomed other perspectives. English language models surrounded her, although, at the same time, she was hesitant to speak as she felt like no one understood her accent. Regardless, Valentina loved working alongside the co-teacher. She had the opportunity to observe and share prepared lessons with students. She felt successful as she simply had to follow the lesson plan and deliver instruction. After four months, the recruitment agency recommended Valentina for an opportunity to substitute in a classroom in the Piedmont region of the state; this was a decision that would change her life path.

Valentina arrived at the Piedmont school excited and ready to begin the interim position. The position was in a first-grade Spanish immersion classroom within a global school. She was proud. She felt sure this would be a wonderful experience. She had learned so much at the school in the coastal district. Valentina felt accomplished and was confident that she would be able to transfer one success into another. After the two-month position, the principal offered her a full-time teaching position in a Spanish immersion program, teaching kindergarten. She immediately accepted.

Valentina was overwhelmed with gratitude for the staff, administrative team, and parents transitioning from a substitute to a full-time teacher. The staff was very welcoming, and they networked with the parent community to help her obtain some of the necessary items that could allow her to transform her empty apartment to make it feel like a home. She said, “People were nice to me. When I moved here, there was a truck full of things for my house. I didn’t know any of these people, but they were trying to help me to make me feel welcome.” She welcomed the support. She worked on getting settled into her new role at the school. She missed her family but was happy, busy, content, and focused on the positive impact on the children in her country. She

knew she had a lot of work to do, but she would stay positive and learn about her new school and community.

Valentina was on her way towards success in her new role and setting. She had her job, a new apartment, and a school she felt proud to be a part of. She said, “I was in my honeymoon phase.” Everything seemed perfect at work, at least the teaching part was. She admittedly had struggles outside of the school setting, especially getting assimilated. Navigating life outside of school was more complicated than she had thought. She struggled to find a sense of belonging. However, Valentina was so happy in her new position. She became a part of the school’s international teacher community, and she was in her comfort zone. She made friends, and she mostly felt happy. After only five months in the U.S., she was promoted. She was the lead teacher in her classroom teaching the language. She was most comfortable in Spanish, but she was missing something, and stress set in.

Disenchantment

Missing My Family

Initially content, Valentina was happy about her decision to move to the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Although she missed her family, she felt she handled the stress when moving to a new place. She had the support of her best friend, even though she lived almost an hour away. She had a network of teachers who worked in the Spanish immersion setting, but she still felt lonely. Suddenly, she hit a “wall.” Describing this time, she pursed her lips and said, “I cried a lot. I was missing my family, and it was hard. I was super attached to my mom.” She didn’t understand how the shift to feeling lonely and distant from her family happened. She was independent and lived alone in Colombia, but the idea of not being able to visit with her family was depressing. Not having fun with her network of friends from Colombia made her sad, and

she cried often. She was by herself in a rural area and couldn't find a community of Latinos. She couldn't figure out how she would stay in a place where she didn't have others with common interests in music, food, and music. A community was something that she actively sought out. She believed being a part of a friendly community would help her adapt. Valentina was frustrated and searching for ways to be comfortable in her new environment.

I didn't think I could do it, you know, stay. I love being a Latina. I love dancing, listening to music and things like that. I couldn't find any of the things I liked to do; you know [pause] like culturally. I didn't think I was going to survive here, and it is so cold here. I love dancing, and there is nothing to do here. So, I used to put things into Google to find help. I used Google and the internet a lot.

She craved familiar things, food items, and a way to network with the Latino community. There were many differences between her community at home and the rural town where she was teaching. Among the notable differences were environmental factors such as temperature and allergens. Valentina loved the summertime and the humid hot air that the summertime brought. It felt like home. She disliked the changes in the climate and said she developed allergies and asthma—an unexpected development that added stress to her experience in the first year.

Valentina soon acquired a position to teach in her comfort zone, primarily in Spanish in a grade she loved. Still, she continued to be self-conscious about her ability to communicate with others verbally. Everyone around her spoke so fast, and many staff and parents had southern accents. She continued to be self-conscious about her accent, which affected her personally and professionally, making her feel more isolated. Although the English she learned in college was easy for her, textbook, and conversational English took more practice and attention. She began to retreat and avoid conversations. She was second-guessing her ability.

Parent Conferences

Making contacts was a challenge for Valentina. She was concerned about what a parent might think if she made a mistake or mispronounced a word. She was comfortable writing notes to parents and sincerely wanted them to feel a part of the classroom, but face-to-face meetings caused anxiety.

In Spanish, of course, I didn't have any issues. When the principal announced it was time for first-semester parent-teacher conferences, I shook. Now I have to sit and talk to my parents face to face. I was shaking—sweaty. Oh my goodness, my first teacher parent-teacher conferences were so stressful. It was easier to work with and speak with the kids because I could speak Spanish.

Valentina was nervous about holding the conferences and explaining how her students were progressing to the parents. She felt like she had a good grasp of vocabulary but still questioned her ability. She mispronounced some words but thought the parents were very understanding and even asked, “Do you mean this?” For the most part, parents were supportive and positive. Valentina was confident that their kindness resulted from being part of a unique program where parents enlisted their children to be in her class, therefore offering her patience and compassion.

Stress at School

Despite the kindness of many around her, Valentina felt powerless in her first months at school. Her new school was large, with a staff of about sixty team members and over 500 children. She was no longer in her small school setting in the rural part of Colombia. Everything was a learning experience, and her classroom was her safe place. She remembers being anxious and would privately cry. She was a part of a teaching team that frequently asked if she “was

alright or needed anything.” However, she didn’t tell anyone that she was privately struggling. In the classroom setting, she thrived. Reflecting on this time, she sometimes regrets not asking for help or sharing her struggles sooner. She didn’t want to share how she felt with her administrators or teammates. She was worried they would question her ability or send her home. Being sent home would be completely humiliating and an embarrassment to her family. She did not share her struggles with her family as she didn’t want them to worry about her.

Another challenge was that Valentina found getting to know and understand the curriculum overwhelming. Even though she had a curriculum in Colombia, the North Carolina standards and progression were different. She frequently worked at night creating materials for her classroom, still hesitant to seek help. She was exhausted. She breathed deeply and expressed,

I know how to teach, but knowing how to teach and what to teach is different. Then taking what I have to teach and adapting that to Spanish, the same standards, is difficult.

Sometimes I felt lost, and I would sit quietly in meetings and think about assessments and paperwork. You know it is a lot. I felt anguish because I didn’t know what to do.

During the grade level planning team called a Professional Learning Community (PLC), Valentina often felt intimidated speaking up or asking questions. No one had been unkind or tried to make her uncomfortable, but she was self-conscious. The teachers tried to explain things during these meetings and shared a lot of information. During the team planning meetings, she diligently wrote notes as writing helped her process the information and improved her English. She would translate them into Spanish. She couldn’t understand why there were so many letters and acronyms for everything involving education. “All the things that we have to do, like, PLC (Professional Learning Community), AIG (Academically or Intellectually Gifted), RTI (Response to Intervention), oh, like all of those letters, why is it so difficult? Just name it

something easy.” She had to find a balance between teaching in the classroom and balancing the stressful parts of the day because she was allowing herself to become overwhelmed with the schedule and structures of the instructional day.

So, it was hard for me to adjust to the American workday. I worked late. The schools are very different in the U.S., so many assessments. I feel that teachers work a lot here, like all of the time. They are here early and stay late. I have thoughts of changing my profession here because more and more things are on our plates every day, but I love teaching.

Valentina knew being successful meant finding balance. She learned how to use the staff handbook because it contained helpful information, especially to understand those committees and meetings. Meetings were essential for her to understand assessments and ways to measure success. During one of the team meetings, one of the members noticed how very quiet she was, and once again, she said that she was “fine.” She missed the simplicity of the familiar structures of her school in Colombia and the ease of being a co-teacher. She knew that if she were going to stay, she would need to conquer her anxiety. Valentina was determined. She needed to use her voice and start to ask questions. She knew she was a good teacher, and she loved to teach. The environment outside of her classroom of twenty-one students caused her stress. If she was going to survive, she needed to take control.

Taking Control

Professional

Valentina decided to take control, which meant she needed to vocalize that she needed help. Her team welcomed her questions. They sincerely wanted to help. They were patient with her and gave her time to process and ask questions, making her feel good. Her Academic Coach

and Grade-level Team Chair became her primary supports and encouraged her to start making frequent classroom visits and made themselves available before and after school. They worked together to help her get comfortably oriented to the school environment and answered any questions related to the curriculum. They modeled how to use the many tools, including technology, assessments, schedules, and forms. They helped prepare her for meetings until she was able to feel confident. She even started taking control of parent conferences. She created a plan of talking points, so she felt more organized and in control. Building confidence helped reduce her stress.

Valentina acknowledged that many of her struggles were because she lacked confidence with articulation and language, which made her anxious. Valentina sought out the assistance of a speech therapist. She realized that some of her problems were because the Spanish language doesn't have the same sounds and grammatical rules as English. Valentina shared her concerns with the speech therapist, who was patient and kind. Valentina appreciated the speech therapist not trying to change who she was but supporting her with tools and strategies to give her confidence when speaking in front of others. The speech therapist assured her that her language was fine but provided Valentina with opportunities to practice and helped her articulate specific sounds and build confidence. Valentina's frustration was eased, and she felt equipped to speak in front of her team, parents, and staff. She translated her stress into success.

Valentina actively used her newfound confidence to participate in the school environment and community. Before arriving in the states, she was always outgoing and confident, yet, her lack of confidence after she arrived kept her from being a part of the school community where she had to socialize. She started participating in meetings and voluntarily sharing at the staff meetings. When there was a decision to begin after-school activities at school, she volunteered to

form a dance club where she could share her love of Colombian music and the dances from her country. Valentina enlisted the help of other teachers to participate, and they performed for the community during a schoolwide international festival. Valentina wore a traditional Cumbia outfit which included a long and flowing skirt and a ruffled off-the-shoulder shirt worn by Colombian dancers. Sharing her love for music and her culture gave her a sense of excitement. She had an elevated confidence level, and she used her enthusiasm to share her excitement for teaching. She began a dance club for the students at her school to learn dances from her country.

Valentina embraced opportunities to speak as ways to practice her language authentically. Feeling successful gave her the confidence to seek another opportunity. She always enjoyed opportunities to learn. Valentina decided to apply to a local university to obtain her Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language.

I decided to go back to the university. I enjoy learning and studying in the United States.

But, oh my goodness, studying here was difficult. You know, grammar at this college level was demanding. I had to study really hard. It was worth it.

Valentina shared how proud she was of obtaining the degree despite the difficulty. Although she completed it successfully, she still prefers to teach in Spanish, but she acquired the skills to confidently teach English to others who seek to speak English as a second language.

Social Network

Having a life outside of school is essential for Valentina. She maintains an active social life and frequently enjoys entertaining. She spends time with her international teaching team, which has members from Australia, Jamaica, Scotland, Venezuela, Colombia, and the States. She explained how important it was for her to make friends here. They helped her socially, even though they all had different struggles. They understood what it took for her to adjust. She is still

very close to her family in Colombia; however, her team has become her family here in America. Valentina has taken trips with them to their countries, and some have traveled to Colombia to visit before COVID traveling restrictions.

My team is so supportive of me. They understand me. I think that is what makes my school special. Not all schools have international teachers. I cannot imagine being at any other school. Landing in the right place mattered. It mattered to me.

With the help of her team, she learned about activities in her community; this has given her a way to meet more people. She met someone special through one of the events, and he helps provide her with emotional support. He was American, knew the community, and knew where to find activities she enjoyed, such as dancing and outdoor activities. His support made a big difference for her because she felt she had somebody to talk to every day about things beyond work. He was very open to learning about her culture. She credits him with helping her transition to American life outside of school.

A Portrait of Determination

Valentina wanted to come to America and have an adventure. She navigated her challenges with inner strength and determination and by learning to ask for help. She understood that she would have to have a good mindset to overcome problems. Determination was key when Valentina faced adversity or crisis in the absence of family and friends from home. Discovering new relationships helped to keep her motivated and focused on her goal. She did not allow anything or anyone to derail her. Valentina is a model of determination.

CHAPTER VI: PORTRAIT OF NAYLA, INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR FROM SOUTH AFRICA

When I decided to become an international educator, I consciously wanted to explore the unknown and travel for leisure. This opportunity took on a more serious note, and I had to consciously consider how it would impact my safety, freedom, and professional growth for both my family and myself.

Mrs. Nayla King is from Benoni, a town located on the East Rand in the city of Johannesburg in South Africa. She describes the town as beautiful, surrounded by four lakes, and nestled between two large valleys. Nayla describes her home and life with fond memories and notes of its incredible beauty. She briefly shared factual information about the region's history, noting famous individuals from the area and sharing her knowledge of slavery, the gold trade, and apartheid. Nayla's family was not originally from South Africa. She sadly stated they were forced to leave their native land of India and were enslaved in South Africa. She is a fourth-generation South African; her ancestors came as indentured laborers from India and were forced to work on the sugarcane plantations.

Nayla is married and has two daughters. Both live with her in North Carolina, and they both attend college. Her mother and father raised Nayla in Benoni. Nayla is very soft-spoken and speaks fluent English and Afrikaans. Regretfully, Nayla noted that she does not speak Tamil, her mother's native language from Sri Lanka, but understands it. She believes it is crucial to preserve the languages of her ancestors to preserve the cultural heritage of her people and so that future generations remember her native tongue. She wishes she spoke more of the 11 official languages of South Africa, and she explained that it is a very diverse country. She has long ebony hair and

a bright smile. During our interviews, she wore a bindi on her forehead (red gem), traditionally worn to indicate that one is married; it signifies beauty and faith.

Faith and tradition are very important to Nayla. She explains that her religion and culture are key to representing who she is and her experiences in life are essential to understanding who she has become. She said her language and history are important to her and shaped her as a parent, adult, and global citizen. Nayla explains growing up in a Hindu household, it was customary to observe the simplest things like fasting, lighting the lamp daily, going to temple or vernacular school, and respecting elders. She explained that Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist friends and families grew up in a multicultural society in South Africa. Growing up, she learned how to be flexible and to adapt. She strives to live in harmony with others in a diverse community with respect and mature thinking. Many of her Hindu cultural practices are congruent with Buddhism. She explained that many of her beliefs related to her faith, like reincarnation, death, and birth. These took on new meanings in the diverse context in which she was raised. Her knowledge about other communities has made her resilient because of opportunities to live in various places, learn about other people, and navigate new settings. She has learned to embrace diverse cultural traits, behaviors, and attitudes. Her beliefs helped her to understand and define her world.

Having experienced this, I now know that while our cultural visions may differ, there can always be situations that influence or change our thinking in the later years. My perspectives were enhanced when I started teaching 25 years ago. A group of multicultural ten-year-old students made me realize that my views and sometimes subjective thoughts had no place in the classroom. It was time to embrace their thoughts, feelings, and cultural views as well.

She values all experiences and explains that they are a part of who she is and notes that they helped her be where she is today. She explains that everything that defines us socially and culturally is influenced by how we grew up and interacted with our parents, caregivers, teachers, and other community members. She chose to become a teacher because she enjoys sharing her knowledge and experiences with her students. Her educational qualifications included a four-year study at a college in Pretoria, South Africa. Then she enrolled at the University of South Africa to complete further work and obtain her teaching certificate. She taught in the town of Ekurhuleni in a primary school, grades kinder to seventh, for ten years before considering leaving her community to seek an experience in the United States.

Her decision to teach abroad was fueled by the experiences of two teaching colleagues visiting her in South Africa. Her friends shared their teaching experiences and life as international teachers working in the foothills of North Carolina. Their stories spurred curiosity and excitement that she had never felt before. She did not realize that she had an undiscovered desire to travel and see things she could only read about or see in movies. She decided to research the process to work in the U.S. and looked into organizations that would assist in the process as her friends did.

Nayla discussed her desire with her husband, Raja. She stated that she would not pursue any venture without his approval. A move to the states would be a significant change for both. However, she believed that leaving her small community would expand her knowledge of the world and enable her to give some perspective of the outside world to children who may never venture beyond their community. Nayla believed that travel would help her learn about the world, making her family ready to face anything. Considering this option was a thrilling time for her as she never thought of herself as a risk-taker, but she had an untapped desire for adventure.

She explained that becoming an international teacher involved complex processes and procedures. Her friends recommended enlisting the support of recruiting agencies, which she did. They helped her complete the application process and make contacts in the U.S.

Every Trip Begins with a Plan

Planning for any adventure can be a complex, stressful, and exciting experience. Nayla researched organizations that recruited international educators to ensure she had the specific qualifications and met the criteria required. Requirements included at least a four-year degree, experience in teaching, fluency in English, a driver's license, and a successful background check. After the initial acceptance of the application, she communicated with a local adviser, who worked as a liaison between her and the recruitment organization to share the interview process, dates, and venues. Completing and securing her visa and passport paperwork was time-consuming, complex, and took two years.

Multiple interviews confirmed she was a strong candidate for the position and could withstand the possible stress and experiences of living and working in a different place from her community. Nayla knew she would have to keep an open mind. She was approved to seek her first position. Nayla created a resume and video portfolio, which school principals could view to get some background information about her and a feel for her personality. As for many international teachers, the placement procedures occurred after a personal interview (via Skype), where she interacted with principals from various school districts. After her second interview with a Principal, she secured a position. She, therefore, obtained a ticket to the U.S. Nayla learned about her future placement assignment and other potentially challenging experiences that sojourners to the U.S. face, and she needed to prepare for when living and teaching abroad. Being proactive and learning about potential challenges helped Nayla transition to American life

and prepared her for struggles she thought she might encounter upon arrival. When she received her final confirmation of her assignment, she was ready to embark on her journey to America.

Excitement Builds

Nayla arrived in the U.S. alone, leaving her husband and young daughters in South Africa to find lodging and set up her new home. She was excited to settle in her new teaching role but knew leaving her family behind could be challenging. She searched within the school community for a place to live close to the school. She looked forward to planning for her first days of school and described how she felt nervous, excited, and anxious. She did not question her decision to move to the U.S. She felt prepared for the experience.

I was comfortable with teaching. I had no major concerns about leaving South Africa or teaching in the U.S. I felt especially confident in lesson planning, manipulating the curriculum, and interacting with colleagues. I believed I needed to form relationships before actually starting to teach the syllabus.

Nayla was confident. She talked about how children are children and that she felt well prepared to teach. Her school was large compared to the schools in South Africa. It was a global language immersion school in a North Carolina urban setting. She described the schools in Johannesburg as too focused on assessment, where the goal is always high-test scores, with no focus on innovation or individualized learning. She said she was excited to be chosen to work where she believed they would put the needs of children first. Her new schools' focus on social and emotional learning needs aligned with her personal beliefs. She spoke of her teaching experiences in South African schools, "Classes are big in size, I mean, the highest I had at one school was 40 in the class, and if you needed extra help, parents had to pay for it."

While she had some anxiety over transitioning from the private sector to the public, she believed she would be able to meet the needs of her students. She knew she would find her place within the staff and school community. She focused on building relationships and getting to know others before actually starting to teach the material in the syllabus. She settled in her first U.S. classroom, an outside mobile unit. Mobiles are used in many districts to ensure reasonable class sizes as the building capacity surpasses enrollment. She found the mobile unit isolating, and her initial excitement quickly gave way to frustration and other emotions.

Disenchantment

Nayla reflected on the initial experiences she had of teaching in the U.S. She seemed almost hesitant when she explained that the population of the school that she was working in was challenging. The elementary students were high-risk students, and they did not take it easy on her at first. The students' behavior was difficult, not what she was accustomed to from her experiences in South Africa. "I expect students to come to school, follow the rules, and desire the teacher's lessons." She was accustomed to students coming to school, being polite, and completing their work; perhaps this was part of the difference between the public and the private sector. In her new teaching assignment, she found that "the students were disrespectful and even started petty fights." They did not seem to understand, respect, or appreciate the school as a place to learn. She stated that "it was tough" while nodding and biting her bottom lip... "not at all what I am accustomed to."

I am an experienced teacher, and I struggled. I was ineffective in the classroom with discipline. I knew how to design engaging lessons and had a global perspective, but it did not matter when students were disrespectful. I struggled, really struggled, for the first time in my teaching career. I knew I had to get the discipline under control. Parents

questioned whether I could speak English fluently. I speak fluently and clearly. I simply had an accent that was different from theirs. Many parents assumed that I was from India and did not seem to back me at first. I still do not understand what difference it made. I thought it was okay to be different. I was discouraged. It was very hard to get up and go to work. Well, after much tears and thinking, I felt I had made the wrong decision. I apologized to my husband and told him I had made a mistake.

Nayla believed she had a good understanding of students and how students learn. She understood how to form relationships and was sensitive to the needs of her students. Nayla always tried to maintain a presence of being friendly and upbeat. She was good at masking her feelings. Every time someone approached her, she told them, "I am fine." Discouraged, she could not understand why there was no help for her. One of the teachers said to Nayla that being in the mobile is "an experience that all first-year teachers get, and it seems that new teachers also get the most challenging students."

Teaching in the mobile unit was lonely, and her students were isolated as well; being in the outside classroom had so many disadvantages. She felt she was not a part of the school community within the building or the school's climate. She was on an *island*, and alone. There seemed to be minimal support from her grade level team, and she was apprehensive about reaching out to her administrative team. When asked, she always smiled and said, "I am fine."

I was so stressed. I used to cry every day of the week. I think I cried more in my first year of teaching in the U.S. than I ever did in my nine years in South Africa. I said I could not do this. I need to go back home. I cannot. I cannot deal with these kids; they will not listen. I am not teaching. I am not succeeding, and I do not know what I am doing here!

At the same time, she was concerned that reaching out to the administrative team would be a sign of weakness. However, she was run down and discouraged, “I did not want to be perceived as a problem. I know how to teach, and I did not know who to get support from professionally without sounding like I was whining or complaining.” She expressed that she had finally hit bottom when she was trying to correct a student’s discipline, and the student yelled at her.

“You come from Africa; why don’t you go back?!”

I will never forget what he said and how he made me feel. Did I make a mistake? Was all of this a mistake? I wanted to do something new and exciting for my family, and maybe I did not fit in here. I thought he was right for one split second [she paused].

She knew that the student was yelling at her out of anger and that she should not take it personally, but how could she not? She had struggled for several months, and this was a breaking point. She had not encountered such hatred or meanness from anyone, especially a ten-year-old. She was disheartened. She took a deep breath and sighed. “This experience was going to break me, and all I wanted was to return home to South Africa.” She was going to have to turn her classroom and experience around. Nayla continued to struggle to articulate her emotions around her teaching experience. She discussed how she would always turn negatives into positives in the past, but in this case, she didn’t know-how. She said, “I think I was in denial.” She knew it was time to change her experience, and she had to find strength and direction from her faith and support system. If she was going to remain in her current position, she needed to ask for help. She became determined to do so. After three months, her husband finally joined her, which she found comforting.

Nayla's husband's presence helped her feel more like herself again. Nayla had to share with her administrative team how she felt if she were going to cope with challenges successfully. She worked to establish relationships with others around her and grew to feel supported and cared for by her staff and team in her current school. However, Nayla still faced some struggles. She initially had difficulties with discipline and with a group of parents who seemed to collaborate to share a complaint with her and the school administration. The group of parents complained that their children could not understand her accent, which was the reason for their misbehavior. They said that her accent made it difficult for their students to understand Nayla's directions and instruction and questioned her qualifications as a teacher. Parent complaints made Nayla uneasy. She found the whole situation distressing.

I had a parent who complained about me and the way I spoke. They say they do not understand me, and her child does not understand me. The student needed many reminders to be respectful, and they did not think their child could be the problem. I do have an accent, but I speak perfect English. I speak English fast and talk very fast, but that has nothing to do with my ability to speak perfect English. I have slowed down a bit. I remember my first experience and the complaints about my accent or because I am different.

Nayla became anxious talking about the incident with the parents and felt it was unfair when one of the parents in the group contacted the principal and wanted her child removed from her class. The principal met with Nayla and felt that the parent's request was unreasonable and unfair. The student had a history of being unkind to others and seemed to be rallying the support of other students in the class, causing discipline issues for Nayla. She wanted to keep the student and build a relationship with the class members. Unfortunately, parents quickly react when their

child expresses unhappiness, but they rarely give teachers a chance. She was also confident that there was no language barrier. Rather, children can be resistant to change, and having a teacher from a different part of the world can require some adjustment.

Nayla appreciated the administrative team supporting and listening to the parent's concerns and respected her desire to keep the student in her class. The student did remain in her class, and there were a few bumps along the way. However, Nayla eventually created a good working relationship with the student and her parents. In fact, the mother of this child became one of the most supportive parents in her class. After an initial transition period, Nayla gained credibility, developed a rapport, and created relationships with her students and families.

I noticed that the parents stopped complaining about my accent. Building relationships has helped them take the time to listen and understand me. Being a teacher from another country is different, and sometimes people do not like other things. Sometimes I think the parents were listening to the student. So, parents need to get to know their child's teacher and form a relationship first.

Taking Control

My husband told me that I needed to "take the bull by its horns." He gave me a good shake and asked, "What are you doing? It is not like you to give up!" During those first few months, Nayla spent much time reflecting introspectively on her experiences. Nayla made a decision that would take patience and tolerance and expressed that she had to look deeply into her thoughts and have a different attitude. She realized that teaching was her passion and that she could make it work. Her husband encouraged her to find one person she felt comfortable with at school to discuss her struggles. She looked for a person who knew the school culture and community, who would listen sympathetically, and from whom she could seek support.

Nayla initially was hesitant to reach out for help. She believed it was a sign of weakness. She wanted to be strong. Eventually, she realized that asking for help would allow her to find strength professionally and emotionally. Nayla understood that sharing her struggle with someone else did not make her a burden, it made her human. She found a supportive team member, Ms. Em, who stayed behind to speak to her after the grade level team meeting. Ms. Em had met her on the opening days of school, but she reached out to her in the first quarter. She wanted to get to know her, and most importantly, she was willing to help.

Ms. Em stressed to Nayla that sharing her background was important but suggested taking a new approach to reach her students. Ms. Em helped her by listening to her struggles and figuring out what she wanted. Ms. Em took the time to introduce her to the school network, with which she was hesitant to share her struggles. Ms. Em helped her understand that reaching out is not a sign of weakness and helped Nayla realize that she missed the relationship piece to education that she valued so much. She started to form relationships with staff in her PLCs, which helped her connect with others. She learned about the students' academic needs and their communities. She talked to the students to understand what was important to them and showed them respect and community. Ms. Em helped her understand that she needed to understand the school culture and community. Getting involved in school clubs and activities was key; this helped Nayla feel like a part of the school. She always knew and understood that relationships were essential to teaching and learning, and getting to know her students was important to her and their success. Her students had different backgrounds and knowledge than the students from her country. They were not the students that she knew from South Africa. Yes, kids are kids, but they come with different experiences, just like she did.

Once she opened up more to others, mutual respect was the outcome, and she learned about their experiences. They also took the time to learn about Nayla and her life in South Africa. She also began to incorporate opportunities for students to share who they were, and they seemed more open to learning about her. Attitudes changed, and so did her experience. “Those difficult students ultimately became my life’s lesson and my strength! My teaching flourished, and I found my sanity again. It was then that I wanted not just to be satisfied with the duration of my stay, I wanted to enjoy it.” With Ms. Em’s help, Nayla was reminded that intentionally getting to know her students fostered her sense of belonging and connections. This relationship helped her manifest success by increasing collaboration and cooperation in her classes. She learned that mindset matters.

Acceptance

Nayla settled into her position at her school and worked there successfully for the duration of her four-year contract. She then accepted a two-year extension, and she noted that she was overall very satisfied with her situation professionally. Nayla learned a lot about herself while working at the Foothills School. She engaged in significant self-reflection, and her perspectives about schools and her role as a teacher evolved, especially as she realized her beliefs and attitudes had a clear and direct impact on her actions and satisfaction.

In reflecting on her early teaching experiences in North Carolina, Nayla stressed the importance of building relationships with each student and creating a positive class culture that would engage her students. She knew she was caring and kind. Nayla realized that it was important for her to feel emotionally supported when confronting challenges. Nayla believed everyone should understand that each person is unique and being different is fine. She presented her culture to the school community during an international showcase and expressed

overwhelming pride in her growth through the experience. She credited this growth to the students and staff of the school. She was very humble.

While teaching in the United States, Nayla completed her Master's Degree in Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). After her contract ended, she believed that when she transitioned back to South Africa to teach, this credential would help her support students and other second language adult learners. In addition, she noted that the TESOL degree would provide her with additional teaching opportunities. There was a need for TESOL in the communities where she worked. The techniques she learned to expand her ability to work with students in reading, writing, speaking, and listening would be invaluable. Teachers who possess such skills are highly desirable in her country and well-compensated in South Africa.

Throughout her experience at her first school in the United States, Nayla supported her students through helping them to develop relationships with each other, creating a positive learning environment to engage students in instruction, and helping all students achieve success. Caring and emotionally supportive classrooms are particularly important for students who have challenging lives and struggle in school. Nayla said she “grew up” during her first teaching experience as an international teacher. The experience made her more confident. She practiced being mindful of her feelings and worked to help people build connections and to deal with challenging situations. She learned to advocate for her students and realized the importance of feeling valued and accepted in her role as a teacher and member of her school community. She translated her knowledge to her students and strived to make them feel welcomed, accepted, and valued, a lesson she could share beyond her teaching experience in the U.S.

Transition Back to South Africa

When Nayla's contract ended, she returned home to South Africa and taught fifth-grade Math and Science at an upper primary school in Johannesburg for 5 years. She was sad for her time in America to end. The transition back was hard for her as she finally felt she belonged in the U.S.

After my first year, I never thought I would cry about leaving. The transition was so hard, but I grew so much, and so did my students. Nevertheless, when your contract is up, you have to go back. I believed it would be an easy transition back to my life in South Africa. In some ways, it was a challenge.

Upon returning to South Africa, she quickly found a job in an upper primary school and found teaching more fulfilling and effortless than she remembered. She used her new professional and educational knowledge to design and plan engaging lessons. The experience and the strategies she acquired while studying in the U.S. helped her become more aware of students' academic struggles; this was especially true for second language learners immersed in mainstream education. She took a deep breath and said with remorse:

As a South African educator, I believe that we are not prepared to deal with second language learners. As educators, our priority is always to teach the content and embrace those students. It is unfortunate when you see students who are just pushed through the system because of age and lack academic knowledge and understanding because of language struggles. That is why I chose to seek my TESOL credentials, and I want to make a difference.

Early in Nayla's career, schools in South Africa were racially segregated. After a political power shift, schools and communities become more diverse. During apartheid, many black

students started their school careers very late and could not speak English fluently. When schools diversified, students had more opportunities, and she wanted to learn more strategies to help students. Students came with many gaps in their learning and needed strategic instruction in literacy. These learning opportunities were a challenge in South Africa due to the high student enrollment and large class sizes.

Her experiences in the U.S. educational system gave her knowledge to support students who had instructional deficits strategically. Nayla remained in South Africa for ten years. She frequently thought of her life in America, and the struggles she had did not seem as stressful as she remembered, as she believes these struggles made her a better teacher and student.

Nayla reminded me that her initial attraction was to explore the unknown and travel for leisure. The reasons took on a more serious note and became opportunities to encourage personal freedom and professional growth; thus, she longed to travel again. When I asked her to provide additional information, she explained, “opportunities to grow in South Africa professionally are limited. At home, we do not have the programs or funding resources to pursue professional learning opportunities.” She understands that quality teaching requires her to be in a continuous state of learning. It is the only way to keep abreast of current methods and best practices in instruction; both are necessary to raise student achievement. For teachers to be as effective as possible, they need opportunities to collaborate with work colleagues at the university and even independently in areas of interest. Her area of interest was second language learners. Nayla regretfully explained that there were limited opportunities to grow professionally in South Africa in this area. She actively sought learning opportunities to grow professionally and to benefit her family.

The safety and well-being of her family were essential to Nayla. South Africa became too stressful with the rising crime and poverty in the area. Her town's increasing amount of crime caused her increased fear and anxiety. She wanted to ensure that her community was the best place to nurture her children and protect them from violent behavior. Many friends and family members left the urban communities and relocated to suburban and rural areas for safety and stability. The changing communities made it challenging for her to attend worship and participate in recreational activities outside the home. She decided that she needed to have a plan to leave South Africa. Some of her friends started teaching in the United States and other places abroad to relocate to safer areas than South Africa.

As a parent, she desired her daughters to have another opportunity to learn in American schools and have them stretched academically and exposed to other cultures. She explained that their knowledge of the United States was limited to what they saw in movies before living in the United States. She chuckled and explained that movies are not always the best example of reality. Nayla talked about her learning style. She is a hands-on learner and wholeheartedly believes "experience is the best education." She reminded me of how she grew personally and all that Nayla went through to fit in when she was in the United States for the first time. She wanted her children to have the opportunities to grow and learn in a safe place to develop skills and cope with challenges. She wanted to model for her daughters that it is okay to take a risk and that, as women, they would need to make choices that could help them improve their way of life and standard of living. Nayla knew she had grown professionally and matured. With her newfound confidence, she applied to teach abroad once again. She decided it was time to return to the U.S., where she had developed a real sense of belonging.

Another Opportunity to Teach in American Schools

After ten years back in South Africa, Nayla discussed with her husband the possibility of exploring opportunities to teach in the U.S. She grew personally and professionally from her first experiences. She was certain since she was familiar with the process, she would not experience any setbacks during the application procedures. Since her initial experiences, recruitment agencies have made it easier for international educators to access the opportunity. She used a recruiting agency during her first experience. Nayla discovered they refined the process to offer more support to their teachers as they transitioned into working in American schools. Even though the process was still cumbersome, the recruitment agency provided access to advisers who were readily available to support her during the process. She knew that she met all of the requirements to be selected. She entered the process with a positive outlook and more confidence than she had in the past. She successfully tackled the numerous interviews and assessments. This time, she continued the process with ease. She completed various online courses to understand her role as an international teacher and was prepared to learn about American culture and share her experiences as an international educator from South Africa.

Nayla felt she was entering the process with more confidence than her first time and knew the position she was seeking. During her first experience teaching in American schools, she learned of schools that had strong programs that focused on global education, and she stated, “I would be an asset to a program that was interested in my skills as an international teacher,” therefore she applied for positions at global schools.

Additionally, Nayla took the needs of her family into account as a factor for why she wanted to return to the states. “My family needed another experience, and since my daughters were teenagers, it was time for a change.” Before returning for her current teaching assignment,

she consulted her husband. Together, they decided she would seek opportunities in the southern part of the U.S. since they enjoyed the sense of community and some small towns. She also felt safe and welcomed. Nayla and her husband would often reminisce about their stay in the U.S. Back at home, there were growing concerns for safety in the community where she was living and teaching.

When I considered where I would move with my family, the location and community mattered. I do not think we would mind whether it was rural. We just embraced the fact that it is safe. You know, I need to feel safe. I do not want to worry about my girls playing in the yard or sleeping in their room like in South Africa. I guess safety and contentment are here, you know, the American dream. Here you can live in a free-standing house and not worry about fences and gates. I do not want my children raised in cages. If I know they are safe. I can work and do my best.

As she continued to talk about her safety and the safety of her teenage girls, it was evident that her choice to return was complex and that the situation in South Africa was also. She spoke about the importance of keeping her family safe. If that meant relocating, she would do it. Many of her friends had left South Africa for similar reasons. Educational opportunities were also a factor in her decision. The more education she had, the safer the homes she could afford and the safer the community where she could reside. Living in such areas would allow her to be more selective of the friends and people who surround her family. This venture would allow her to travel abroad again, continue relationships, and form other friendships. She believed these experiences made her a stronger teacher and global citizen.

During her second experience in a North Carolina Global school, Nayla described elements of her assignment that she found empowering,

When it comes to student engagement practices, we have the freedom to manage our classes and meet the students at different levels of this engagement. We have various resources to scaffold lessons that accommodate ESL students and individuals that require special instruction.

Nayla's administrative team supported her desire to work directly with parents and students to address any concerns or issues. Her prior experience empowered her and gave her confidence to address her students' behavioral and academic needs. She uses the teacher observation processes to help guide and support her. She thrives on feedback from administration and peers. Nayla maintains that feedback is a way for her to fine-tune her teaching abilities. Her pride and satisfaction in her second experience represent a drastic departure from how she initially felt in her first teaching experience. She receives positive praise and mentions she is proud to say she teaches for the local school community. "Community support is one of the main reasons I chose to return to American schools because teaching is a respected profession. We are recognized for even the smallest contributions we make in class."

Nayla was very hesitant to speak of any negative interactions she had with peers during her experiences. She only desired to be perceived as having positive and supportive experiences. However, she explained that another international teacher appeared very unhappy and distanced herself from Nayla. Nayla was very attuned to the other international teacher and did not like the idea or feeling that there was any problem with someone. She always tried to avoid conflict and strife.

There were some teachers initially who were challenging to work with and unsupportive, rude. I will not mention names, but they were always moody. You know, we are sitting in

a planning meeting, and you do not know what people think...when I am uncomfortable in situations, I would keep to myself. I do not want to be a problem.

Nevertheless, the international teacher spoke negatively about Nayla in a staff meeting; the teacher went to the principal to address the concern. The problem was that Nayla was being assigned to a position that the other teacher found desirable. The other international teacher was upset that Nayla was getting a job she felt more qualified for. The principal met with Nayla and asked if she needed his support, and she explained that she would feel better handling it herself; she had gained confidence and wanted to address the problem head-on.

After a team meeting, she approached the international teacher and asked, “What I had done to offend you?” The international teacher initially acted like there was no problem, and everything was fine (a feeling that Nayla was familiar with). In Nayla’s previous experiences, she always said she was “fine,” even when she was not. Nayla explained that she felt like she had done something to offend her. According to Nayla, they sat down and talked about the situation. Nayla could see that the other international teacher was unhappy about the principal’s decision. She was able to empathize with and understand the perspective of the other teacher because of her previous experiences. Nayla was proud of herself for handling the situation, noted personal growth, and expressed that changes in assignment had to do with her ability to meet the needs of the children.

Relationships Matter

Nayla desired to return to the United States because she missed her American experience and relationships. Nayla is now a twenty-five-year veteran teacher. She is currently teaching in the fourth grade in a global school in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Since the school adopts a global approach, the school has many opportunities for cultural exchanges. She is a

member of a diverse staff, and there are staff members from various places around the world. Nayla is in the fourth year of her current contract as an international teacher. She mentors teachers who may need guidance adjusting to such a diverse educational environment.

As I have noted, Nayla is currently working in a school with a global perspective. Nayla intentionally chose a global school teaching position as she knew it would mean the staff was diverse, with a range of cultures and ethnicities. Nayla believed that working in a school with a global education program would align with her personal beliefs about the importance of acknowledging and respecting someone's cultural identity. She felt working in a global school would allow her to teach and learn alongside teachers from around the world. Nayla felt pursuing unique opportunities would be key to her professional success.

She maintained many connections while in the states and treasures her experiences with new friends. She genuinely craved more experiences her second time as an international teacher. She was a more experienced teacher and possessed more skills, what she called "tools in my toolbox." She was confident that she would not struggle as she did before.

On her return to American schools, she did not have the roller coaster of emotions that she had in her initial experience as an educator abroad. She seemed to fall into many of the routines with ease. Her new school has a buddy system that has helped her transition. Her previous experience reminded her of the importance of obtaining support; she knew that relationships matter. Most importantly, she understands that having a problem is not a reason to be embarrassed.

When she arrived at her new assignment, she was greeted by the administrative team and assigned two supportive buddies. One buddy helped navigate her transition into the community while her other helped her adjust to the school. While on this second assignment, she has pursued

opportunities to continue learning through coursework at a local college and obtained her credentials for teaching the academically and intellectually gifted population. She feels empowered by education and says it helps give her a voice as an educator and better meet the needs of her students.

Teaching and learning about different cultures worldwide continue to spark her curiosity about how people are unique and how diversity influences how she feels about her role in education. Nayla looked back on her previous experience and compared it to her current role as a teacher in a global school. “My experiences are unique, and one can either learn from them or succumb to not-so-good experiences. I choose the former as I firmly believe that what you put into it comes back to you.” Teaching is part of who she is.

It defines me; therefore, I continuously strive to succeed in my experiences. I am in a phenomenal global school where the merging of cultures and language learning are daily interactions of learning experiences and global awareness. I get to interact with teachers from all over the world.

In her current position, Nayla works with a supportive buddy, a grade-level team, and other staff members with whom she feels comfortable talking and working out problems. She feels successful and attributes her success to forming relationships and being open-minded. She used her previous experiences with parents and students and applied what she had learned to her new context. She values learning about new places and communities. She met so many teachers at her new school. The school climate was so welcoming and interested in her and her experiences. Nayla expressed excitement about positive things. She ultimately viewed all experiences as learning opportunities. She had minimal challenges in her return to the American classroom.

Nayla explained that she did not have the same level of struggle or hardship in her second experience. Her second experience was being a part of a school that had a staff prepared for unfamiliarity with the new school culture and community dynamics. Nayla remembered that she had had multiple challenges. In a moment of reflection, she wondered if other international teachers had similar struggles. She felt that success meant navigating and overcoming challenges, even if her struggles sometimes left her feeling lost and lonely. Nayla learned to trust others, learn from the struggle, and conquer her problems. She frequently returned to conversations with people where she realized she made a difference, including her husband, Ms. Em, administrators, and a supportive grade level team. She learned how to advocate for herself and eventually share what she learned with others. Nayla became a mentor teacher for other international educators entering her district; she understood their struggles and stresses. She was able to teach them to advocate for themselves.

A Portrait of Resilience

Nayla's story embodies resilience. She demonstrated the ability to embrace challenges and adapt even when situations seemed hopeless. She had a positive mindset and channeled stress through her ever-present faith in order to summon the strength to overcome her struggles. Nayla was motivated by the love of her husband and children. She was reflective and understood that learning and gaining from the experience of teaching in American schools would require her to be confident, optimistic, and resilient.

CHAPTER VII: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

School districts across the nation struggle to locate, recruit, and retain highly-qualified teaching candidates to fill vacancies and provide a first-class education to an increasingly diverse student population. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the teacher shortage as the need for highly-qualified staff increases, and the supply no longer meets the demand. Despite recruiting efforts, many rural and urban schools struggle to staff positions in traditional subjects and specially designed initiatives, such as language immersion and global education. Recruiting the most highly qualified educators is essential to the success of these programs and, ultimately, student success. In response to the need for teachers, some districts are recruiting international educators to fill these roles. In this study, I examined three international teachers recruited to fill such positions.

Through this dissertation, I explored the experiences of three international educators who decided to pursue teaching positions in North Carolina public schools. These educators openly shared their personal and professional experiences navigating and acclimating to their new lives while teaching in North Carolina public schools. My interest in working with international teachers was sparked by my role as a public-school administrator working with a language immersion program in a global school. In my position, I wondered about what brings these teachers to American schools and wanted to know more about their experiences as they transitioned to their teaching roles. Thus, in this study, I explored their challenges and perceptions of support while acclimating to their new school setting while learning about the similarities and differences in the curriculum, pedagogy, behavior, and academic expectations from their own country. I also explored how they overcame difficulties they faced.

I collected my data by interviewing each teacher three times as part of my search for goodness. As I analyzed the data I collected from interviews, I started to get a bigger picture of each of their experiences and was able to transform their words and details into a written portrait. Each portrait documents the experiences of an international teacher currently working in elementary schools in North Carolina: Josefina (Chapter IV), Valentina (Chapter V), and Nayla (Chapter VI). Although their experiences are unique, they helped me to answer the one research question that drove this study: What are the experiences of international teachers recruited to teach in the United States? I used the data to explore my participants' experiences and paint an image with words.

Key Findings

By studying international teachers, educational leaders can better understand their journey as they transition from their native country, what brought them to their schools, and the challenges they navigated once they arrived in their school and community. I embedded the transitions they experienced while crossing educational borders in their portraits. They shared why they chose to travel and work abroad, beyond their interest in adventure and immersing themselves in an unfamiliar culture. The three teachers desired to learn and bring back knowledge to students and colleagues in their native countries who may not have experiences beyond their rural community or town. These foreign-born teachers successfully navigated new communities and crossed educational borders related to culture, language, and experiences connecting to their home and work life. These changes began when they started to research the possibility of teaching abroad and risk leaving the familiarity of their native home. Despite being from different localities around the world, the three teachers had some similar experiences and,

of course, differences. I describe these similarities in what follows, explaining how they navigated culture shock, mindset, and relationships.

Culture Shock

In Chapter II, I provided information about the theory of culture shock and the phases someone may go through as they travel or navigate a new experience or place. During the stages of culture shock, individuals learn to cope with new and perhaps unfamiliar things and learn about their new environment. International teachers sometimes experience physical or emotional challenges as they learn about their unique situations. Culture shock may occur despite how well they tried to prepare themselves for their new experiences.

The teachers I studied indicated they were excited, thrilled, and happy about their new adventure upon arrival. Josefina, Valentina, and Nayla all researched where they desired to relocate. All thought they had realistic expectations of their experiences; yet they were still traveling to an unknown location. Perhaps they idealized what it would be like when they started their new life. The excitement of their honeymoon phase slowly gave way to stress and feeling disoriented, which are both signs of culture shock.

Josefina, Valentina, and Nayla all had a spirit for adventure and a desire to have a new experience in a new place. All three teachers were struck by the financial impact of settling in a new location. All talked about the costs associated with buying cars, renting apartments, relocating to a new area, and then making a place they could call home. Their excitement did not prepare them for navigating the longing for the comforts of home or the emotions that would arise from feeling homesick and transitioning into the aggression phase.

During the aggression phase, all three teachers discussed how they were impacted by emotions and intense feelings marked by sadness, crying, and depression. These feelings were

related to homesickness and longing to be home in their native land with friends and loved ones. Sometimes the sadness they felt left the teachers feeling defeated and hopeless. Even environmental factors such as a new climate, changes in the seasons, and seasonal allergies affected them and their emotions in a way that research could not prepare them. Their feelings and experiences made them sensitive to situations at home. Sometimes, these feelings carried over to the school environment and affected their sense of belonging and confidence.

Despite being experienced teachers, they were initially overwhelmed with the expectations of their new school setting. Long hours and large quantities of paperwork seemed insurmountable at times. In the school environment, there were additional stressors such as planning, meetings, student discipline, and interactions with parents and peers. Some of these stressors left them feeling isolated, vulnerable, and overwhelmed as they processed the nuances of being a part of a new staff and a new language for the language immersion teachers. The dual-language teachers talked about the stress of needing to listen and take notes in Spanish to translate their notes to English to ensure they comprehended meetings, notes, and presentations, making collaborations last longer. The international teachers also struggled with disrespect from students or parents who worked to understand them and their accents in the school setting. In their country, teachers were highly valued and respected by parents and students in ways there were different than in the U.S., and some of their interactions left them feeling dissatisfied with their teaching situation.

To overcome these challenges, the teachers in the study began to acclimate and adjust to their new environment using various strategies to help them cross over from one culture's life and expectations into the American classroom and communities. The three teachers learned the importance of being flexible and connecting with someone on staff or making a friend in the

community. They all worked on self-reflection and felt assured that they would be able to overcome their challenges. Their time adjusting to problems and understanding their feelings helped them recognize the need for support. They all talked about the value of support and the new friendships they formed when they assimilated into their new role. They also learned the importance of asking for help. The support they received helped them immerse themselves in the experience and develop close relationships with colleagues and the community, allowing them to enjoy a deeper experience.

Mindset

The three international teachers were all open-minded and exhibited a positive mindset. These women possess additional traits that helped them navigate their new environment throughout their international experience. At different points in their experiences, they questioned “why” or apologized to someone for choosing to move to work in America; however, they found the inner strength to remain focused on their chosen path. Josefina, Valentina, and Nayla reminded me that some common traits are success traits: resilience, determination, and trust. These qualities helped them navigate and overcome difficult situations while struggling with homesickness, loneliness, doubt, and confusion. At the same time, they crossed over from the comforts of their own culture into that of public schools in North Carolina.

When considering the quality of resilience, all three teachers in this study exhibited it in their transition into their U.S. teaching roles. Each teacher, at some point, felt like they had failed in some way and could not continue. While they struggle to navigate this feeling at times, they also were able to tap into a source of inner strength. Using their inner strength gave them a way to push through challenging times. Resilience helped them change (evolve) into the person they have become and reminded them that they came with knowledge and experiences from their own

culture and community, which they wanted to share. Each teacher learned coping strategies to lean on as they pushed forward with determination. They worked to assimilate while never forgetting who they are, whether a teacher from South Africa or Colombia.

One lesson from their experiences is that international educators need to build trusting relationships. Trust is essential for anyone navigating a significant change or a new situation. Trust helps to reduce stress and can help individuals build confidence. The international teachers trusted the organization that helped recruit them, and the school that hired them, but they had to build trust and respect within the staff and school community to feel confident. Building trust takes time and can seem risky, but it helps each teacher move beyond their comfort zone into a different country, culture, and community. Ultimately, trusting others allowed the three international teachers to embrace their unique experiences fully.

Determination was another quality that all three teachers shared. They used the quality of determination to keep them focused on their goals and ensure they were not letting themselves down. Others reminded them that they needed to persist and not give up on their dreams. Knowing their individual goals helped them persevere and obtain additional degrees, opportunities to travel, and safety for their families. Having a sense of determination gave them the motivation and the drive to stay on course, even when they felt defeated; for all of them, the assistance of someone they respected and trusted helped them keep on their path.

The qualities of resilience, determination, and trust helped each international teacher discover strength from within themselves and helped them realize that they had the tools to overcome challenges at home and abroad. Whether the international teachers had the qualities or developed them while assimilating, they were necessary to work in the new teaching environment in the United States. Teaching is a complex and challenging profession for all

educators, especially considering the diverse needs of students, parents, and school-based needs related to communication, lesson planning, understanding the best practices for teaching, and classroom management. For the international teacher, perhaps even more so than native born teachers, the qualities of resilience, determination, and trust are essential to meeting the everyday challenges in their classrooms and schools.

Relationships

When teachers travel to new locations, they may go through struggles. When they learn about life outside of familiar surroundings at home or school, it may cause stress. Having moral and emotional support can be helpful when one is assimilating into an unfamiliar environment. Initially, some teachers in my study were hesitant to ask for help, even though they knew support was available. Spouses and loved ones were available to provide personal reassurance and even emotional support when needed. The teachers created support networks that helped them by offering someone who could listen and empathize, allowing them to feel confident and reassured when they doubted their decisions and helped them to fulfill personal dreams. Those who traveled with family members were very aware of their needs and never wanted them to feel like they were isolated.

Two of the teachers in the study were married and had stable relationships in their native countries of South Africa (Nayla) and Colombia (Josefina). The other teacher from Colombia had strong familial ties. While adjusting and acclimating to life in North Carolina, they transitioned to rural surroundings that were unfamiliar to them and unlike their native land. To navigate these spaces, they maintained and/or developed supportive relationships.

Valentina was single when she arrived in her school community. She craved a social life that the others did not mention. Valentina was new to the community and sought cultural

activities like those in Colombia with culture, music, and dance. When she made a close friend, her experience and willingness to stay seemed to transform quickly. She openly shared her emotional struggle and how she longed to connect with others. Making friends and connections with others in the school community helped her. She learned about their community by engaging in social events and opportunities with new friends. She began to participate in activities with others who had similar interests in music and dancing, which inevitably reduced stress and made her happy. Through these activities, she formed lasting friendships. Knowing that she had friends and others who cared about her helped Valentina feel welcomed and supported.

Each of the teachers found friends and colleagues who helped during the rough patches, while the support of someone they loved helped the two married teachers when they believed they might quit. The three international teachers' relationships enabled them to learn about fellow teacher and administrator support, international community members, and local cultural traditions. Their experiences were not perfect, nor were they what they expected. Yet each of the teachers discussed learning a lot about themselves as they overcame struggles and navigated their new settings and the myriad borders they crossed to work in U.S. elementary schools.

Discussion

Educational leaders must understand and acknowledge the needs of teachers undergoing transitions, while also helping them to build trusting relationships and assimilate into their new school community. This study can inform districts as they share strategies for school leaders of the many ways they can support international teachers. Each portrait had commonalities which I note as themes of struggles related to culture shock, the effects of having a positive mindset, and the value of support. In the meeting to review the portraits with each international teacher, each

participant was excited when they reviewed their story, knowing that someone heard and even cared about their experiences mattered to all three participants.

Additionally, I learned in this study that many of their colleagues were unaware that the international teachers in their schools were struggling. They cared about these teachers, but did not always realize what they needed or how they could best be supported. Admittedly, until my experience with Jasmine that I described in the first chapter of this dissertation, I was also unaware of the depth of her struggle, and I can only imagine that others who I have worked with struggled in similar ways. One of my peer reviewers also commented on the way international teachers face struggles.

I have found that they do an excellent job of masking how they feel. The international teachers are so grateful for the opportunity to work. It seems like they think it is a sign of weakness or that they will disappoint leadership if they have a problem or concern – perhaps even worry if their abilities will be questioned or risk being asked to return in the early. Communication is key.

My study has brought to my attention that I need to reach out more consistently to see if the international teachers are doing okay, especially knowing that they may not be comfortable asking for support or help. My three participants each soared when someone took the time to listen and offer support, regardless of whether it was a teacher, specialist, administrator, or a loved one.

Recommendations for Practice

When considering a plan to support international teachers, leaders must strategically consider what systems can be implemented to benefit all newly arriving staff. All new teachers would likely find support systems valuable, even though international teachers have unique

needs compared to their domestic counterparts. School and district leaders are often the initial contacts for the new teachers and can create a support plan for teachers *before* they arrive at their new schools. To ensure that all new teachers feel supported and successful, districts and school leaders should offer a continuum of support. Without proactive efforts to ensure a smooth transition to a unique setting, teachers may not realize that they need additional guidance until they are physically or emotionally at a point when they no longer desire to stay in their new position and country. Schools and districts should provide support before they reach this point.

Even though international teachers come to the districts and schools with teaching experience, it may be helpful to have a point of contact available to help them navigate questions and problems upon arrival. A mentor may be able to provide international teachers support as they assimilate into the culture and climate of the school and community. Working with a buddy teacher may be helpful when an assigned mentor is unavailable. Having a buddy assigned to their school helps them learn about the particulars of their school, and it can help them settle into their new role and navigate the school community. Buddies can help international teachers obtain information to fulfill basic needs like learning about expectations, knowing where and how to get classroom supplies, and clarifying school rules and procedures if necessary. Information and support can help international teachers feel comfortable and ready to set up their classrooms.

When international and new teachers have their basic needs met, they can attend more effectively to the demands of their jobs, such as lesson planning and making instructional decisions. Experienced teachers can help them approach curriculum and planning with confidence. Still, it may be helpful for administrators to provide new international teachers with additional opportunities to meet with their buddies, grade-level team, or academic coach. Academic coaches work alongside teachers to offer support when needed. If academic coaches

are available, they can help international educators with curricular understanding. Coaches can also assist teachers with using data to improve the quality of lessons in literacy and math, the two subjects assessed most frequently. Coaches can help educators offer a variety of instructional delivery methods. Additionally, academic coaches can help international teachers with the countless acronyms commonly used in public school classrooms, which may be unfamiliar. The goal is to keep the teachers informed and supported with the most up-to-date information and strategies.

New teachers receive an overwhelming quantity of information on an almost daily basis. School leaders can help them assimilate this information by doing some fundamental things. Leaders can help teachers by being patient, offering grace, and being willing to meet with teachers to support them. Being present and visible, listening and anticipating, and ready to answer questions can go a long way to help international teachers feel welcome and supported. The more time spent orienting new teachers and helping them familiarize themselves with expectations, the sooner they can focus on the needs of their students.

Additional support for new teachers may benefit all staff. Introducing all staff and giving them time to get to know each other can help international and new teachers. Having international teachers share information about themselves and their cultural identity may help them feel valued and a part of the staff, in turn leaders can also provide opportunities for all staff to share their cultural background. One of the comments from one of my peer reviewers focused directly on the importance of this support:

Providing support to international teachers is critical in forming bridges between all staff members – especially new folks from another part of the world! When I became principal at the global school, it was a "us and them" mindset with traditional and immersion

teachers. There was no evidence of bridging between staff two years into the program before my arrival. That took significant effort, but the payoff has been transformational in our school culture and embracing diversity in ways we never thought possible.

Incorporating lessons and activities related to cultural understanding and sensitivity may also support teachers as the student population becomes increasingly diverse. This was the case for the teachers in my study, whether they were starting a dance club or teaching their students about their home culture. These orientation efforts aim to expand knowledge, increase respect, and prevent international staff from feeling isolated, building inclusivity.

Supporting teachers as they become a part of the community can be done in several ways. Understanding that a school and a district employ hundreds and sometimes even thousands of people can make supporting international staff challenging. According to Lee (2015), and evident in my participants' experiences, "having a partner from the mainstream culture that can serve as a role model or a mentor for internationally educated pre-service teachers will ease the transition into the mainstream culture" (p. 1913). Beyond having an assigned buddy or mentor, offering international educators an opportunity to network and connect with others with similar experiences or needs may help them overcome struggles and reduce stress. Networking opportunities may assist teachers in finding a social life beyond the school setting. Learning about their community beyond the school helps international educators meet others with similar experiences. By doing so, educators from abroad can celebrate their unique culture and carve out a niche for themselves in a multicultural world while retaining their uniqueness (Howard & López-Velásquez, 2019).

Instructional leaders are responsible for supporting international teachers and traditional staff as they navigate their new school culture. Much of the research cited in this dissertation is focused on the assimilation and adjustment of staff members into their new American school setting. However, principals and other school leaders should provide international staff opportunities to maintain the unique qualities they bring to their schools and not simply try to help them adjust and acclimate to the school setting. By encouraging uniqueness, leaders can support international and traditional teachers as they bring their diverse perspectives and knowledge to their school community. Sharing that leaders value all teachers as individuals promotes inclusivity. By doing so, teachers gain a sense of belonging and encourage respect as they share their wealth of knowledge and understanding with their students and community. According to Nganga (2011), sharing “aspects of heritage, geographical location, one’s upbringing, historical and social contexts, gender and culture in addition to professional competence and myriad factors define the sense of self” (p. 163). International teachers cross borders personally and professionally by participating in opportunities to share their stories, making them feel more connected.

Teachers in a new school and district need time to understand the nuances of their unique setting. Reflection and time are necessary for anyone navigating a change. International teachers and anyone who may find themselves in the unfamiliar territory must research where they are going so they best prepare for the journey. For the participants in my study, this was not an issue. They all explored opportunities and learned about their new contexts in advance. Yet they nonetheless struggled to overcome some challenges. All teachers, especially international teachers, need to understand that it is okay to say, "I do not understand," and "I need help." Individuals must enter new settings knowing they will have challenges and be expected to

navigate the unknown. The goal is for new staff members to establish a work-life balance, learn alongside their colleagues, explore the world around them, and ultimately enjoy the ride.

Limitations

This research study offers insights gained by interviewing three international educators. As with all research studies, there are limitations to this research. The major limitation is that I only profile three participants who work in unique settings – global schools in central North Carolina. In their portraits, I discussed the three study participants’ personal and professional backgrounds, including their experiences before arriving to teach in American schools. These experiences are unique to them and may be different if they came from other parts of the world or different cultures. Their experiences may differ from international teachers who work in other parts of the country, at other schools, or with older children, for example, in middle or high schools. It is likely that all international teachers experience some level of culture shock, though this may be more challenging for some as compared to others, and perhaps especially for teachers who come from minoritized ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups, or for those who wind up at schools that are not used to hiring international teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

International educators are recruited to fill vacancies in schools with specialized language and global education programs and in areas where there are teacher shortages. The three educators in my study came to the United States as experienced teachers in their own countries with various skills and interests. They all agreed to an initial three-year commitment with the option to continue to remain in the U.S. for an additional two years. Valentina talked about the political unrest in her country. She explained how she had colleagues in education who came to teach in the United States and did not desire to return to their country due to the political unrest

and unstable living conditions, which were in part bi-products of the Covid-19 pandemic. This situation was further complicated by the numerous travel restrictions which have developed, restricting other friends and family members who desired to leave their home country, crossing political borders to avoid conflicts and ensure personal safety.

Additionally, when reviewing the areas of disenchantment, the three educators hint at experiences related to language discrimination, and microaggressions yet do not go into great detail about these experiences. I believe that to learn about these types of struggles related to racism and potential xenophobia, it would be helpful to explicitly ask questions about these hard-to-discuss topics even when the participants are hesitant to speak about them.

In this study, I shared the journey of three teachers who left their native countries for personal reasons. All three sought adventure and were able to navigate the struggle to adjust to their school and community life. They indicated they were currently enjoying their experience teaching in North Carolina elementary public schools. They would make the same decision if they had to choose to work as an international teacher again. Yet I wonder about the teachers who had less than positive experiences or returned to their native countries prematurely. More research is needed on those teachers so that we can understand what went wrong and work to ensure that in the future, all international teachers have more success.

The portraits I present document the journeys of just three teachers and how they overcame the struggles they faced. The stories I shared are just a small sampling of each educator's experiences. As I reflected on the experience, I wondered what the experiences were of their significant others or of the support network of teachers that helped them through the struggles. I have also pondered would three male educators have similar experiences as their female counterparts? Do American educators that move abroad have similar experiences,

struggles, and culture shock? I also wonder about teachers who come from other places around the world who might have different challenges. More research on international teachers, in general, could help to ensure that they are all successful and can help to dispel any of the myths I discussed at the beginning of this dissertation related to lower pay or international teachers lacking some qualifications.

Final Thoughts

During my dissertation, I have contemplated “The Road Less Traveled.” My path and processes in writing this dissertation were not straight but full of curves due to an unexpected change in my professional leadership position and assignment. When I began the dissertation writing process, I encountered unforeseen detours as an educator with 28 years of experience in elementary schools. I was unexpectedly reassigned from the elementary level to the middle school level, a place that I had no direct knowledge or understanding. I arrived at my new destination feeling lost. I was a “fish out of water,” in a new place. While I realize my transition was not even remotely the same as what international teachers go through, I experienced culture shock. It seems odd that simply working 23 minutes further from home could profoundly affect me and how I feel about the importance of supporting educators regardless of where they are from. Additionally, while working on my dissertation, the school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic left me confused, disoriented, and even hopeless. I did not anticipate these events, which caused anxiety, stress, and the unexpected desire to quit, even though I felt that I previously had a clear and solid plan for finishing my dissertation.

During these detours, I considered alternate paths. I frequently revisited my plan for this project, recalibrated, and found my way back on my track, in part because I was inspired by my participants stories of resilience, strength, and determination. When I felt lost and overtaken by

my emotions, I sought out friends, loved ones, and even professors who gave me support and encouraged me to stay on my track. They reminded me of my *why* and why my study mattered. This is the support that kept me focused and grounded. During these times, even though I was in a very different situation, I reflected on the journeys of the three female international teachers I interviewed. Although they chose to navigate a new life and culture and had challenges, I felt empathy and understanding for their situation. I comprehended the effects of change and culture shock on someone, whether they sought to change or change was thrust upon them. At the beginning of a significant change, everything can look and seem inviting and exciting, then suddenly, you might experience twists and turns like the highs and lows of culture shock until you finally feel acclimated and know you will be successful in your new role, and hopefully even happy. Eventually, I, too, arrived at my new destination, forming new relationships, trying to have a positive mindset, embracing the change, and enjoying the journey, but it has been challenging. The experiences of my participants and my own journey have reminded me of the importance of supportive friends and colleagues and of being vulnerable enough to ask for help when I need it. I am also more understanding of others struggles and plan to work even more strategically and systemically to create a culture of belonging in my current school for teachers, students, and staff alike.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Interview Guide and Research Questions

I. What are your research questions?

- a. What are the experiences of international teachers recruited to teach in urban areas in the United States?

II. Basic Information

- a. Time:
- b. Date:
- c. Place
- d. Interviewer:
- e. Interviewee:
- f. Position of interviewee:
- g. Years at the current placement:

III. Introduction

- a. Introducing myself
- b. Discuss the purpose of studying
- c. Explain and sign IRB
- d. Explain the process for recording/storing information about the interview
- e. Ask if the interviewee has any questions before the interview begins.

Interview Guide

- I. What is your current role? (icebreaker)
 - a. What is your native country? Language?
 - What are your degrees and certifications?
 - How many years have you been teaching?
 - How are teachers supported in your country?
 - What made you seek teaching opportunities in the United States?
 - Describe the process used to allow you to teach in the United States.
 - Tell me why you choose to seek a position teaching in American schools. How did you prepare for the transition? How were you personally impacted by your decision to teach in the United States?
 - Tell me about your experiences upon arrival in the school community you work. (society)
- II. Describe your initial experience/treatment in your school. (Professional)
 - a. Schools: What supports were available?
 - b. Parents: How were you received or supported?

- c. Students: Were student behavior and work ethics similar or different from your home country? Describe the students you taught in your native country: socio-economic status, diversity, language.
- III. Tell me about your experiences upon arrival in the United States. (society) (Please explain)
- a. Tell me about your initial experience/treatment at your school. (Tell me more)
 - b. What were supports available? (Professional)
 - i. Educators
 - ii. Parents
 - iii. Students
 - iv. How were you impacted by your decision to teach in the United States? (Personal) (Explain)
 - v. Describe how you have changed since you first arrived in year one. (Personal)
 - vi. When you arrived, were you supported? How?
 - vii. What do you wish you would have known before you arrived?
- IV. Explain your school-based experiences
- a. Students
 - b. Teaching
 - c. Have you had the support of a mentor, team member, or staff member? Have you been able to create supportive relationships? How have they been supportive?
 - d. Administration
 - i. Have you had the support of your administrators? How have they been supportive?
 - ii. What surprised you about your position or school?
- V. Describe any struggles you have had.
- a. How did you confront challenges? (Tell me more)
 - b. Were you supported by anyone or a group of people?
 - c. Can you identify when you felt like you had overcome any obstacles or challenges?
 - d. When did you finally feel like you had a sense of belonging, fitting in, or confidence?

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Pennington
INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT LETTER

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Dissertation Topic: The Journeys of Three International Teachers Working in North Carolina Public Schools

Dear Potential Study Participant,

My name is Carolyn Pennington, and I am an assistant principal pursuing my doctorate in Educational Leadership. For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study to examine international teachers' experiences while teaching in North Carolina public schools. I am interested in what brings these teachers to the United States, how they experienced their transition and acclimation to their new setting, the challenges they confront, and the support they received. By studying international teachers, educational leaders can better understand their challenges and how to respond to them.

You are eligible to participate if you:

- are an international educator teaching in a global school or are a teacher in a dual-language setting in a North Carolina public school
- have been teaching in your current setting for more than one year

If you choose to participate, I will conduct a series of interviews where I will ask you to participate in three (3)-60 minute sessions about your experiences as an international educator. Your participation will be strictly confidential. Your name and identity will not be associated with the information you give.

I will use portraiture as the methodology for this research study on international teachers' experiences in public schools. A portraiture is a narrative form of qualitative research in which researchers search for goodness. I chose portraiture because I believe this is the best method to share their stories. I have worked collaboratively with international teachers in the elementary setting because I find narrative descriptions informative. This study aims to explore, acknowledge, and document the experiences of international teachers who work and live in the United States.

Please consider my invitation to participate in my study. Call or email me if you would like to be a part of my research. I appreciate your time and consideration. I will contact you with additional information.

Sincerely,

Carolyn T. Smith Pennington

Carolyn T. Smith Pennington

Principal Investigator

Phone: [REDACTED]

email: [REDACTED]

April 12, 2021