*Research Article*

# Development of a U.S.-Scottish Immersion Experience and Its Influence on Participants, Partners, and Programs: An International Case Study

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## Abstract

This study explores how a long-running, special education teacher education-focused international immersion experience has grown over time to include robust international exchange between home and host institutions and how participation influenced past participants' professional practice. This research fills a gap in the research linking special education teacher preparation and international immersion experiences by focusing on a twenty-year-old immersion program which places preservice special education teachers in Scotland for a five-week experience including a homestay, school-based practicum, and travel. Researchers included two groups for this multiple case study design: Scottish school partners and preservice U.S. teacher participants. Interviews and reflections from each group were analyzed using the Relational-Cultural Theory framework to understand how this program grew and led to mutually beneficial partner and participant exchanges. Findings indicate that trusting relationships emanating from long-term interactions are key for meaningful exchange and that participation in the 2019 program influenced current teachers' professional decisions and trajectory.

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## Introduction

The benefits associated with international immersion experiences (IIE) are well-documented and far-reaching for participants and, oftentimes, international partners (Deardorff & Charles, 2018). Teacher education programs have long sent teacher candidates across the globe with lofty objectives aimed at developing participants' cultural competence (Byker & Putman, 2019), social justice knowledge (Newton et al., 2020), and professional practice (Boynton Hauerwas, 2017). Despite known benefits of IIE, reviewing such programs reveals fewer than five programs for U.S. preservice teachers to complete a special education-specific (i.e., participants placed in a setting in which they teach children with disabilities or special needs) IIE. Faculty labor required to establish and carry out such programs, coupled with need to limit time to degree for participants, likely explains the limited number of programs (McKenzie, 2009). Literature investigating special education-focused IIE—both in how these programs developed and how they impacted participants—is sparse, with just a single study readily available (Johnson & Battalio, 2009) and no studies which longitudinally analyze these variables. Given the universality of disability globally, the marginalization of individuals with disabilities across history (Nielsen, 2012), and the need for highly qualified special education teachers prepared to teach diverse populations (Kangas et al., 2018), the case for exploring special education-focused IIE is clear. This study describes and explores how an IIE involving preservice special education teachers has developed and evolved over twenty years of international exchange. Included are considerations including: (a) student participants' experiences immediately following the 2019 iteration of the program and a follow-up two years later and influences on their professional practice, (b) impacts on partner schools in Scotland, and (c) how the IIE program has changed to meet Scottish and American teacher education needs.

## Background on Educational Systems: Opportunities for Reciprocal Learning

Understanding the context in which the Special Education in Scotland IIE program has evolved and operates requires a brief program description and

comparison of American and Scottish education policies. Our countries, while sharing many similarities, approach education in distinct ways. For example, how educators identify students as a group differs, with US policies favoring "student with a disability" versus the Scottish "student with Additional Support Needs." Though similar in name, nuanced differences in these terms are central to understanding educational policy in each country and how participants and international partners have grown through our interactions. We start this section with a description of the program, American education policy, Scottish policy, and end with a brief comparison and discussion of each system.

## Programmatic Context

Our Special Education in Scotland IIE is a five-week program which starts and ends in Edinburgh, Scotland. Prior to that time, U.S. participants attend monthly meetings which prepare them for their time in Scotland, including community building activities, article discussions based on the Scottish education and political systems, and general international travel topics. The focus of this IIE is to work with Scottish young people with additional support needs. The draw of this program is that it offers an option for preservice special educators, who have rigidly prescribed education course schedules, to participate in an IIE which provides an accessible environment in that there is no need for fluency in an additional language and a perceived assumption of similar cultural aspects (Edwards, 2000).

Participants are placed across Scotland, from Edinburgh to the Orkney Islands. School teachers and other school personnel provide homestays and welcome participants into their two-week school-based practicum. We focus on practicums in schools serving students who, in the United States, would be identified as having a disability.

Participants then spend two weeks at the Scottish partner university completing a team-taught course (Introduction to Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities) and engaging in cultural immersion activities. Two American professors teach the course along with guest lectures from the partner university faculty. Scottish guest lecturers focus on inclusive practices in education and how promoting access for students with additional support needs is an act of social justice. Participants also engage in wide-ranging cultural activities which emphasize the region's geography, history, and culture.

## Educating Students with Disabilities in the United States

Exploring the history of educating students with disabilities in the US is a serpentine, rocky path, one which has come far from institutionalization and segregation, yet continues to face ongoing issues of disparate outcomes for students. Succinctly discussing the American education systems is complicated by the size of the country and its reliance on federalism: each state educates its children with limited federal oversight. While issues of special education implementation vary by state, this discussion of overarching federal policies includes a history of educating students with disabilities, key laws related to inclusion, and ends with a discussion of current inclusion issues in PK-12 public schools.

The US Constitution makes no guarantee for education and, prior to 1974, states took a patchwork approach to educating students with disabilities. Combined with a lack of standard approach to specialized instruction, students were often institutionalized and wholly segregated from society (Nielsen, 2012). The 1960s Civil Rights Movement and efforts to promote racial school integration served as the model for similar efforts to inclusively educate students with disabilities (Skiba et al., 2008), reaching fruition with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1974 (EAHCA). Through its various reauthorizations, the EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and updated to address limitations (IDEA, 1997, 2004). The component most pertinent to our program is that of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

The concept of LRE, while debated in the courts since the 1970s, guarantees inclusion of students with disabilities to various degrees. As described in the IDEA, children with disabilities may be removed from the general education setting only when the child's disability is "such that education in regular classes cannot be accomplished satisfactorily even with the use of supplementary aids and services" (EAHCA, 1974). Allowing students with disabilities to be physically present with their nondisabled peers in the general education classroom was a major step forward on the path to inclusion. Providing equitable access and necessary services, however, is an ongoing struggle for schools and disability advocates. This underscores the need for a focus on opportunities, such as IIEs, to develop culturally competent and highly qualified teachers.

## Educating Students with Disabilities in Scotland

Scottish education is rooted in values of universalism (Riddell, 2009). Since the Enlightenment period, "schooling for all" (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009, p. 4) has been legislated in Scotland. This distinctive act established Scotland's belief that education, democracy, and social justice are intertwined. Since Scottish devolution and the (re)establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the Scottish education policy context continues to portray a commitment to these values of education for all, via a commitment to "Getting It Right For Every Child", (Scottish Government, 2008) and a national drive for "excellence and equity" (Scottish Government, 2016).

Since devolution, Scotland has passed Acts to enshrine educational inclusion into law. For example, the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 establishes children's right to mainstream education; and the Education Act 2009 takes a broad and inclusive view of needs, i.e., we may all have needs at some point within our formal educational journey. These legally binding acts are translated into practice via The General Teaching Council for Scotland's national teaching standards (GTCS, 2021), and the current Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE).

The CfE engenders ambitious and personalized learning experiences 'for all' children and young people (3–18) (Scottish Executive, 2004). Building on the founding values of wisdom, justice, compassion, and integrity (Gillies, 2006), CfE is designed to give all children the opportunity to develop four interrelated capacities: "successful learners, effective contributors, responsible citizens and confident individuals" (Scottish Executive, 2004). These capacities shift the focus onto the learners and learning core curricular areas, such as health and wellbeing, literacy, and numeracy.

The current policy landscape, coupled with increasingly diverse learner populations, has resulted in greater emphasis on inclusion in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The Inclusive Practice Project (IPP), established in Scotland, was designed to respond to this challenge by embedding inclusion and related concepts within an ITE program. The IPP was built upon the premise that human diversity is natural and should be harnessed, via socio-cultural approaches to learning and teaching, to enrich and enhance learning for all (Florian & Rouse, 2009).

333333

Despite efforts to ensure preservice teachers feel prepared to support all learners, there are ongoing concerns that different ITE routes and approaches are required. Most recently, an independent review of 'additional support for learning implementation' has recommended that a specialist career pathway is developed for Additional Support Needs teachers at preservice level (Sottish Government, 2020), as is the case in the US (see Table 1). Whether this recommendation is implemented or not, continued reflection and discussion, including with international partners, should facilitate a compassionate response to local, national, and global challenges and opportunities.

## Opportunities for Growth and Collaboration

Though the US and Scotland approach educating students with disabilities in significantly different ways, each system possesses strengths: from the American perspective, teachers are highly specialized to teach students with disabilities, whereas in Scotland, teachers are prepared through a more inclusive, social justice lens. In Table (1) we illustrate key differences between American and Scottish education systems.

| Element | Scotland | USA |
|---|---|---|
| Terminology | Inclusion: no singular definition, however the term 'inclusion' is used throughout national documentation, (SUIG, 2022). Additional Support Needs: this is a broad conceptualisation of needs that can apply to all | Inclusion: not defined at the federal level. Special education: specially designed instruction which meets the unique needs of a child with a disability. |
| Teacher training | All pre-service teachers educated for mainstream schooling via university-based Initial Teacher Education. Further qualifications are required for registered in-service teachers to specialize as 'Additional Support Needs' teachers. | Pre-service teachers may specialize as undergraduates in general education (elementary or secondary), special education, or both. Licensure requirements vary by state. |
| Identification procedures | Children, families, teacher(s), and other related professionals work together to ensure any needs are recognized and supported appropriately. Children and families have specific rights and should be central to this process. | Schools engage in a "child find" process and work to identify students who may have a disability. National definitions for disability eligibility exist, but each state sets about the process for identifying students with disabilities independently. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Legal position for inclusion** | The Additional Support for Learning legislation in Scotland promotes inclusion. All children have the right to additional support if needed. Local Authorities are responsible for ensuring that all pupils' needs are met. | The IDEA requires that students with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment." While open to interpretation, this presumes that students with disabilities are included in the general education setting with specially designed supports as much as is feasible. |
| **Stance on exclusions** | The aim in Scottish schools is to prevent exclusions, via "effective learning and teaching" and building relationships.<br>If exclusion is the only appropriate option, the views of the child / young person and their family are fully considered. | When education in the general education setting is "not suitable" for the student with a disability, the student may be taught separately from their peers without disabilities. A team including the family, special and general education teachers, administrators, and when appropriate, the child collectively make this determination. |
| **Specialist provisions** | If a child / young person and their family feel that their needs cannot be met in a mainstream school, then specialist provision is available.<br>Local Authorities are responsible for providing alternative provision in such a scenario. | Schools educate students with disabilities according to their needs as determined by the IEP team. Teams consider a "continuum of services" ranging from full inclusion with supports in the general education setting to complete exclusion in a hospital or residential setting. |

**TABLE (1):** SCOTTISH AND AMERICAN EDUCATION: COMPARING ESSENTIAL ITEMS

Given this context, when leveraged intentionally, educators in both countries stand to gain diverse knowledge, skills, and dispositions through cultural exchange experiences. The Special Education in Scotland program can serve as an example of this leveraging and expansion of culturally sensitive knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Diverse viewpoints and nuanced differences in education systems functioned as motivators for more in-depth conversations around cultural competencies (Phillion & Malewski, 2011).

A major goal of the Special Education in Scotland program was thus to foster conversations about culture and educational practices. To this end, student participants were given reflective prompts that challenged them to consider how educational practices and experiences differ by country (Marx & Moss, 2011). Initial attempts at these prompts included: (a) Discuss similarities and differences in general curriculum and adaptations made to curriculum for students with special education needs; (b) Compare overall environmental

differences and similarities; (c) At what point in your travels did you experience significant cultural differences that challenged you? and (d) Explain how (if at all) this program has shaped or changed your global outlook? These early efforts to surface cultural differences and promote the concept of internationalization of education served as a foundation for continuous program growth. As program expectations became clearer with respect to the "how to support the development of knowledge about internationalization of education," the need to emphasize U.S. preservice teachers' cultural competency became apparent. Before going forward with any potential program changes, we needed to understand the connections among Scottish partners, U.S. participants, and the U.S. institution. To this end, we undertook the two-prong investigation reported here: first, to better understand how the IIE program had influenced past student participants' perceptions of their personal and professional growth, and second, to examine how relationships with host school partners grew and what were their perceptions of the reciprocity or mutual benefits of these relationships.

# Methodology

## Relational Cultural Theory

Built on the premise that relationships and connections are fundamental to human well-being, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) counters many dominant theories that posit that 'successful' human development should be understood in terms of 'independence' and individual 'autonomy' (Jordan, 2018). The more we came to understand the Special Education in Scotland program, the more we came to view it as a partnership for mutual flourishing. The success of the program rests on collaboration. In this article, we put the RCT framework forward as a way to make sense of what gave the collaboration its power.

First developed by Jean Baker Miller, RCT was primarily applied within counselling, with a particular focus on the experiences of women (Jordan, 2008). However, RCT has now been applied across other contexts, including education (Jordan, 2018) and study-abroad programs (Harris et al., 2019), due to its fundamental concern with 'growth-fostering' relationships, and in turn social justice (Jordan, 2018). RCT is particularly critical of the human disconnections that are created through the systems of marginalization and oppression that lead to the othering, and further isolation, of people who do not 'fit' (Jordan, 2018).

This makes CRT doubly relevant to the U.S.-Scottish program, which engages professionals and preservice teachers who are working with children for whom systems of individual competition and narrow measures of success are not working. RCT therefore is a highly appropriate theoretical basis to make sense of their inherently relational work as they strive to engage with children and young people who experience social and emotional behavioral difficulties in their educational settings.

The relational nature of learning and teaching and the applicability of RCT to support the navigation of experiences within educational settings, i.e., practicum / field education, has been explored through the empirical work of Edwards et al. (2013). Building on the work of Edwards and Richards (2002), Edwards et al. (2013), focused on three critical 'aspects' of RCT: (a) mutual engagement, (b) mutual empathy, and (c) mutual empowerment, to facilitate connections and support relationships between student teachers and their mentor teacher.

Within the present study, RCT was not used as a tool to support practice during the IIE, rather it is being used as an analytical tool to develop research-based insights as to why this IIE has had a lasting and mutual impact on students and host teachers alike. To this end, mutual engagement, empathy, and empowerment offer a means to understand the relationships and growth that evolved through the IIE. Definitions of each element follow:

1) Mutual Engagement: "an ongoing process, which develops a special connection between the student and teacher" (Edwards & Richards, 2002, p. 38).

2) Mutual Empathy: a willingness to be moved by another's experience and the intention to move the other by being authentic (Edwards & Richards, 2002).

3) Mutual empowerment: 'Miller and Stiver (1977) state that mutual empowerment is the result of mutual empathy and connections experienced in growth-fostering relationships. The key to empowerment is personal growth, which results from the student and instructor working together to build a deeper and more meaningful connection.' (Edwards & Richards, 2002, p. 43).

We use these elements of RCT to organize and understand the mutual exchanges which participants and international partners experienced as part of the 2019 Scotland IIE.

## Multiple Case Study Approach

In contrast to large-scale research on the impact of study abroad programs (see, for example, Paige, et al, 2009), this study uses an exploratory, qualitative 'multiple case study' approach (Yin, 2014) to focus on the questions: (a) how do student participants perceive the impact of the IIE on their ongoing practice? (b) How do host school partners perceive the benefits of building reciprocal relationships with program faculty? These questions were designed to surface any possible ongoing impact of the IIE program, for *both* the students and the host teachers / schools. Due to our desire to ensure that the data could 'speak' with clarity amid complexity, we used the case study framework to ensure that rich insights were not lost and  discover themes from the reflections, interactions, and the connectedness of the student participants' and the host school partners' perceptions.

In line with case study methodology, this project draws on a variety of data (Yin, 2014) collected from both the U.S-based preservice teachers and the school partners based in Scotland who 'hosted' the students. Each case is constructed by examining the data collected from the students (at two time points: 2018 and 2022) and the host school partners' perceptions (collected 2021 and 2022). In other words, the formation of two cases: one of students' perceptions of their experience and long-term influences of the program and the other the host schools' perceptions.

## Participants

Since the Special Education in Scotland Program's inception, 131 preservice U.S. special education teachers have completed the IIE. The student participants were undergraduate special education majors from the American Midwest. Given the program's evolution over time, we selected participants' reflections on how the IIE affected their growth and influenced their professional practice today from one of the later iterations of the program (2019). The initial reflection in 2019 from the program was completed by all 23 participants. Six host-school partners and eight Special Education majors and minors participated in the follow-up investigation in 2022.

In the Program's 2019 iteration, 23 participants, including 21 women (91%) and 2 men (9%) participated. All participants identified as white, non-Hispanic. These demographics mirror the home University's teacher education program (TEP) demographics, which included 1,034 women (81%) and 249 (19%) men. Demographics across special education as a discipline tend to be similar, with high percentages of women. The 2019 participants' initial reflections were written during and immediately after their IIE and followed by another two years after the IIE.

The 2019 program had nine school partners. Of those nine, five agreed to share their perceptions with us. One school, H, was represented by two people. The school partners who participated represent a wide geographic area and exemplify an array of services for young people with additional support needs. They are:

a)  FS, director of services at St. P, a residential and day school for children and young people with specialized learning needs that primarily serves adolescents.

b)  DM, head of operations at R, a secure facility which supports young people who have been exposed to traumatic childhood experiences resulting in many complex needs and specialized learning needs.

c)  MM, currently service manager (primary education), was head teacher at O, an island primary school which serves all young people in a mainstream setting.

d)  AM, deputy head teacher at B, a secondary service across all secondary schools in a local council which provides support for young people with a wide variety of additional support needs.

e)  NS (Chief Executive) & MS (Head of Education) at H, a residential and day school for children (aged 5-14 years) and young people with specialized learning needs

## Data Collection

Due to time-zone differences and COVID-19 restrictions, data were collected in a variety of ways and across two points in time. First, students' reflective logs were collected at the time of the immersive exchange program (2019). Further follow-up data were then collected in 2022 from the same group of students. The students participated in semi-structured, online (via zoom)

focus group interviews. The questions asked were designed to explore the impact of the IIE program on the students both personally (2019) and professionally (2022): seeking insights about what each student learned through the process and how these experiences have already impacted and continue to impact their practices. Meanwhile, data from host schools were collected via a semi-structured online survey, which asked open-ended questions regarding their experiences of hosting a student and was designed to collect qualitative insights to address the nature of the reciprocal relationship.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this project was sought and granted to the lead researchers. The research embraced the principles of transparency, confidentiality, and anonymity to ensure that it engaged fully with the grounds on which approval was granted. Issues pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity are particularly sensitive when conducting focus group interviews. It was therefore important to ensure the former student participants and school partners were empowered to make informed voluntary consent regarding the nature of the interview. Participants were fully aware of their right to opt out at any stage of the process. With expectations established, it became apparent that the former student participants and the host school partners were pleased to share their stories.

## Researcher Positionality

All three authors are former K-12 public school teachers who now work at their respective institutions as teacher educators. Karsten Powell is a white, cis gender American man with a disability who is an associate professor. He has been involved in the U.S.-Scottish IIE since 2019. Kirsten Darling-McQuistan is a white, cis gender Scottish woman and is a lecturer. She has been involved with the IIE since 2019. Rosemary Battalio is a white, cis gender American woman who is a professor emerita. She has been involved with the IIE since 2005. Authors' school-based experience ranges from early childhood through secondary special education. Each author centers inclusion and social justice in their research, teaching, and supervision.

## Analysis

Following data collection, each case (student and host teacher partners) was analyzed in both a deductive and inductive manner. Thematic analysis was used to garner the central themes that describe the student participants' and

school partners' perceptions. We followed what Nowell et al. (2017) see as the key elements that ensure trustworthiness in using this method: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Each of our three co-authors analyzed the transcripts from the student participants' interviews and school partners' surveys independently, before coming together to discuss, negotiate, and refine the identified themes.

# Findings and Discussion

## Participant Influences

This section focuses on how undergraduate preservice teachers experienced and were changed as a result of their involvement in the 2019 Special Education in Scotland program. Participant comments are organized through the Relational-Cultural Theoretical framework elements of engagement, empathy, and empowerment.

## Reflection Prompts

We asked participants to write three reflections across their five-week experience: (a) at the end of their homestay during week two in Scotland, (b) at the end of their experience at the partner university during week four in Scotland, and (c) following their return home. Participants accessed and responded to each prompt using the American university's online learning management system. Prompts were based on the university's R2 liberal education learning standards (University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, 2021). These prompts and the aligning RCT elements are as follows.

1. Focusing on your school and home placement, consider what you have learned about the world's diverse cultures, environments, practices, and values. (*Mutual engagement and mutual empowerment*).

2. Considering your school experience, our class discussions, and the meetings with the [partner university] faculty, reflect on the US and Scottish educational systems from a position of differences, similarities, conceptual foundation, and/or perception of the power for change. (*Mutual empowerment and mutual empathy*).

3. Now at the end of your international immersion experience, consider how you have grown. What did you learn? How were you impacted? What surprised you? What disconcerted you? How have your educational

practices been influenced? What is your biggest takeaway? (*Mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment*).

The recurrent themes running through these reflections, organized according to RCT, now follow.

## Participants' Engagement Throughout and Following the IIE

In their homestay reflections, participants focused on a comparative exploration of how Scots and Americans differ in their approaches to education, yet how family life is similar. All participants expressed thanks for their homestay experience, and, without exception, every participant mentioned feeling at home. Following these feelings of acceptance and belonging were mentions of trying new foods and adjusting to the overwhelming Scottish hospitality: "I felt like I was letting them down when I couldn't finish my portions which were bigger than you find in an American restaurant!" Additionally, Participants (n=9) mentioned that they valued the familiarity of family life in Scotland, including sharing meals together, engaging in banter and deep conversations, and appreciating how tightknit each family appeared.

Due to ongoing engagement across participants and partners, student participants were better able to compare and contrast US and Scottish educational systems. The most common comment across all participants was that, across the guest lectures, their Scottish practicum, and their educational experiences in the US, there are benefits and hindrances to each country's system. Participants viewed the Scottish system as being holistic, focused on student wellness, and connected with principles of social justice, but weak in terms of academic focus and teacher training. Participants described American education systems as providing strong emphasis on academic achievement and specialized training for special education teachers, particularly in behavior management, but limited in access for diverse students. Participants identified that collaboration embracing both systems made for a stronger approach than would pedagogy focusing singly on an American or Scottish approach. Participants continued to reference this theme in their final reflection.

## Participants' Empathy Developed Through the IIE

Participants mentioned several themes connected to building empathy with this empathy growing over time and nearly all (n=19) discussing their surprise at the Scots' emphasis on health, wellness, and relationships in the schools. Participants were pleased to see that wellbeing—both physical and

mental—was seen as a central component in schools. Participants also mentioned that, while they appreciated this emphasis, it came at the expense of academic instruction. Seven participants included comments such as: "I understand that students need to be comfortable and calm, but I think they would have fewer behavioral problems if the teachers spent more time covering academic subjects." Lastly, participants mentioned they were not expecting such a strong emphasis on preparing students for life after school: "Students spend most of their day learning about housing, how to manage money, how to cook for themselves." In each case, the participant engaged in a comparison to their experiences in American schools.

Following two weeks spent at the Scottish partner university and guest presentations from Scottish professors, participants' reflections shifted. Whereas participants previously wrote glowingly about the Scottish system's holistic approach to educating children, we now noted a more skeptical tone. One participant remarked, "I love how the Scots approach teaching the whole child and their emphasis on wellness, but does it really work?" At this point, participants appeared to be struggling to meld their past experiences in American schools with their new experiences in Scotland. Another participant alluded to the complexity inherent in experiencing both country's education systems, mentioning: "The Scots put a strong emphasis on equity and social justice. This is such an important piece that would benefit American schools."

Participants focused primarily on how they grew more empathic from their experience in their third reflection. All participants referenced variations of self-discovery and often combined this personal growth with their development as a teacher:

> I learned more about myself on this trip than I would have thought possible. I also had opportunities to grow more as a teacher than I have had in previous [in the US] school placements because I felt like teachers here were so open to my suggestions.

Additionally, participants referenced "leaving my comfort zone" (11 participants) when describing their experience and also touched on the term "renewal" (eight participants).

Perhaps most relevant, participants described how their experience in Scotland enhanced their capacity as empathic educators. Eight participants shared that they had become more self-aware of their beliefs about education

and that, without an opportunity to compare their own educational experiences and training to a different model, they would lack the ability to think critically about themselves. The Scots' emphasis on wellness and holistic education also had an impact on participants as nine described their plans for incorporating wellness topics into their own pedagogy. While examining how pre-service teachers describe the influence our Scotland IIE had on their teaching is important, understanding the trip's long-term impact on teachers' professional practices is crucial.

## Participants' Empowerment as a Result of the IIE

To better understand the long-term impact and view of the program, we contacted participants in April 2021 asking how the IIE had influenced their current professional practices and choice of professional roles. Responding participants (n=8) reflected on three areas of influence associated with the IIE: impact on their professional practices, impact on their development as teachers, and how they have come to understand special education as a form of social justice. We reviewed participants' comments and, after preliminary coding procedures, four themes, all of which align with the RCT element of empowerment emerged: (a) increased capacity to meet students' mental health needs and incorporate care as a central pedagogical approach, (b) improved ability to implement inclusive and collaborative teaching methods, (c) thinking more critically about education, and (d) embracing personal growth. The eight student participants were: Ava who spent time at St. P, Katherine and Beth were placed at R, Ben and Mary experienced O, Denise had a variety of experiences at B, and Madisen and Kyla observed H. Using direct quotes and summaries we describe each theme below.

### Capacity to Meet Students' Mental and Care Health Needs

Now ending their first or second year of teaching, 2019 participants reflected on how the U.S.-Scottish IIE influenced their ability to teach students with mental health needs. Madison and Kyla found that their time spent in Scottish schools helped them put mental health and education into context: "This experience really challenged what I knew as an educator. I understand that a student's behavior is a form of communication" (Kyla). Additionally, three respondents noted that Scottish schools normalize discussions about mental health wellness. These teachers felt empowered to incorporate wellness discussions into their classrooms, much as they observed teachers doing the same while in Scotland. Beth noted:

I saw and heard the reality of the world. There are a lot of students that I encountered and will continue to encounter and teach that have very heavy "invisible backpacks." I carry that with me to this day. Each day I enter my classroom and see different behaviors, I just remember "they have a heavy invisible backpack today."

These teachers saw clear connections between their time in Scottish schools and their ability to reach students struggling with mental health issues. Mary stated: "This actually played a huge role in my search for my first teaching job. In my school district, they do focus on health and wellness. This attracted me because of what I learned and saw in Scotland." Relatedly, participants also cited their experiences related to care.

Participants saw their experience in Scotland connected with how they incorporate care into their classrooms. Participants were likely to describe their Scottish school placements as being influential in their reason for incorporating care in their everyday lessons and student interactions. For example, one teacher (Madison) stated "…everyone struggles with something, I need to meet their needs. This is what Scotland does and taught me." Other early-career teachers use an "underlying sense of care in all [we] do" (Kyla) as one of their most important lessons. Beth summed up the importance of the lessons they learned in Scotland by stating that "… care can change lives." Six of the participants mentioned elements of care in their pedagogy and connected these skills to their time in Scottish schools. Meeting students' mental health needs and providing care for all students also connects with teachers' comments regarding inclusion.

## Development as Inclusive and Collaborative Educators

All eight respondents mentioned that their capacity to implement inclusive practices grew because of their time in Scotland. Mary remarked "[I am] much more inclusive in my general education classroom than I would have been if not for my experiences in Scotland." Participants noted the Scots' emphasis on accepting students "for who they are" was a strong model which influenced their own practices. These comments are significant considering the relatively short period of time (two weeks) in which participants attended school-based placements. How teachers go about carrying out inclusive practices also shifted.

Because participants had experiences in two different education systems, they were situated to understand broad viewpoints about collaborative teaching and pedagogy. These teachers referenced the synergy present in diverse perspectives and that students learn more when teachers collaborate. Four respondents reported seeing commonality when collaborating with diverse groups: "For all the differences, we share far more in common. I see our common humanity" (Madison). Additionally, Denise referenced their interactions as a form of networking which continues to pay dividends: "...lifelong connections with peers, profs, and Scots. These give me a world-wide network of help through my first year of teaching." While teachers reported growing professionally, they also discussed how they became more critical of their profession.

### Critical Thinking in Education

IIE participation is rooted in developing participants' critical thinking skills and, in the case of our 2019 participants, critical thinking was a central theme. Ava touched on this as they remarked their experience "Challenged what I know as an educator." Further, others saw that their time in Scotland enhanced their understanding of US education policies. Katherine sees their professional work in the greater context of American issues: "...helped me understand racial issues, such as disproportionality, in the US and my role in dismantling [those systems]. Similarly, Ben reflected:

> I see that advocating for those without a voice—students with EBD— is a form of social justice. Students with EBD are not understood and society often expects them to fail. This program helped me understand that these students need an advocate for their sake and for the sake of society.

These comments follow the general theme that, through their time in the IIE, participants learned to critically question the system in which they were educated and now work. While all themes up to this point have focused on their professional development, participants also grew personally.

### Personal Development

Participants reported that they had grown personally in unexpected ways. While some struggled to describe how they changed, stating their growth is "largely unexplainable" (Katherine), others were more specific: "[this program] demonstrated the power of risk-taking. This was the most significant

part of my life to date." Another connected their time in Scotland to confirming that they had made the right career choice (Denise). Many participants also referenced how their confidence grew, as Mary describes here:

> Personally, I learned that I can do a lot more than I thought. I can meet new people and learn new perspectives. I can travel with a group of people and become lifelong friends with them. I can travel alone and not be afraid. This trip was empowering, healing, and I learned to forgive and let go.

Participants' growth two years after studying abroad is clear.

The influence on participants' personal and professional development is unequivocal: Partaking in the IIE helped them become more inclusive, caring, and collaborative teachers while also growing more confidant personally. Participants readily identified important lessons learned while in country, but their reflections two years after returning home reveal the program's longitudinal impact on the participants and their K-12 students.

## Global Partnerships

This section reflects the voices of Scottish school partners concerning the U.S.-Scottish partnership on which the Special Education in Scotland rested. These Scottish partners were central to the program's success. Their role goes far beyond the actions of being the "receiver" of U.S. students into their schools and homes. Their presence enabled a multifaceted relationship in which reciprocity and professional connectedness supported the personal growth of all. They were asked two questions, each of which allowed for open-ended comments:

1. Do you believe that there is a reciprocal relationship between your school and the Special Education in Scotland program? Explain.
2. If a reciprocal relationship does exist, what have been some of the benefits of this relationship?
3. Feel free to make additional comments.

Based on their responses, six themes emerged that fit with the RCT framework of mutual empathy, engagement, and empowerment and elucidate how the IIE has developed beyond a tourist experience and into a uniquely transformational experience for participants, program faculty, and partners.

Partner Empathy

The special relationships that have developed over the years reflect the principles of RCT. The first connection between U.S. and Scottish faculty was their mutual empathy and authenticity in committing to young people with social and emotional behavioral difficulties. From 2005 onward, the Special Education IIE's central focus has been this population of young people. This focus led to partnering with specific schools, each committed to this population. This shared empathy and authenticity set the stage to promote the development of mutual engagement and mutual empowerment.

Partners' comments invoking social justice reflect how our thoughts and educational choices changed as our reciprocity deepened. The one-sided relationships of the early program no longer exist as partners have become increasingly interrelated and interconnected. AM witnessed this influence with his staff:

> My staff have engaged fully in professional dialogue with the students we host and learn about the different education systems, but they ultimately learn that working successfully with children with additional support needs is a universal skill and it reinforces approaches used locally to have an international context.

MM affirmed that "Over the years, we have had the opportunity to meet the staff accompanying the students which gives us a real sense of the program and the values and expectations of the program for the students placed with us." Additionally, DM explained:

> The Vygotskyian advocation of working together to co-construct knowledge and understanding, whilst building social, emotional, and behavioural skills, is often applied to teacher-student relationships and effective learning in classrooms. However, the central tenets have equal influence and applicability to reciprocal relationships and, from the outset, the desire to co-construct 'knowledge and understanding' was apparent.

The program uses both professional and personal experiences across schools, in conversations with Scottish educational experts, and in homestays to support the student participants' growth in cultural competence. The intersection of school and home provides students with enhanced engagement. NS & MS noted "...the feedback has been very positive in relation to the

engagement, respect and appreciation shown to their hosts in relation to the hospitality provided." Additionally, NS & MS found that UWEC students have all been willing to participate in activities asked of them and have brought a lot of energy and humor into the H's team, with universally positive feedback about their values, attitudes, and personalities." As part of the home stays, MM expressed that "All the families who have hosted students have very much welcomed them into their homes and shared their lives with them" and "As a home host as well, I have really enjoyed getting to the know well all the students placed with us and my children also benefitted from getting to know different people from across the world."

## Partner Engagement

Developing relationships takes time. During this time, the conversations, and the subsequent opportunities for learning flourished. These exchanges enhanced the mutual engagement of our relationships. FS stated, "Reciprocity is the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit" of which St. P gained a wonderful experience of sharing our practices, processes, procedures, and people with program students and staff who became friends." DM expanded on how engagement is an important element of the program, sharing: "A reciprocal action or arrangement involving two people or groups of people who behave in the same way or agree to help each other and give each other advantages." They also acknowledged that "the R and [institution] relationship began with a decision to help one another."

Our partners' words are powerful reminders that this IIE is not just for the students, but an opportunity to sustain a partnership in which faculty's professional and personal growth are unanticipated outcomes. Weaving partners' voices throughout the RCT principle of mutual engagement, a sense of reciprocal relationships emanates.

Time has provided us with the ability to develop a solid foundation of shared values, a sense of mutual empathy. Rising from these shared values, mutual engagement emerged from our shared trust, respect, and understanding. As noted in Edwards, Davis, and Harris (2013) the key to building and maintaining connection is involvement (p.2). Over the years, we have intentionally developed a two-way engagement as a way to enhance both knowledge and ways of educating this population of young people. MM wrote:

...special relationship between us and Special Education in Scotland program which has built up over the years. This is based on mutual trust and respect which takes time to build up." AM concurred, as he is "incredibly proud of our long-term relationship with Rose and the Special Education Programme at the University.

To encourage mutual engagement, one would need to willingly acknowledge and accept diversity of practices and thoughts. "Diversity can be defined as differences in the way people view the world... Successful practices do not merely tolerate diversity of opinions but encourage it." (Talia et al., 2006, p. 48). One of the most important aspects of this program is the diversity of thoughts and ideas which are shared-our shared knowledge. We entered these relationships knowing and expecting diverse views of the world. NS & MS explained:

> ... we have been extremely impressed with the knowledge students have brought to their placements, demonstrating that their university special education course was highly relevant to working with the group of children placed at H. They were not only generous with their knowledge but were also very interested in the Scottish educational context and H's approaches.

MM noted that "we need to embrace opportunities to widen the world and experiences for our children."

If a partnership is to be mutually engaging for all, then no one can be actively closed off, but seek ways to grow through interactions. Participants must communicate an openness to new ideas and views, so that a deeper understanding of cultural competence can be fostered. FS found that "The Special Education in Scotland program allowed our young people and staff to learn alongside peers about special education in the USA and to compare and contrast with the provision within Scotland." For us, one of the most important cultural concepts which demands a mindful approach, is that "in Scotland, social justice and inclusion are both interlinked and embedded within the educational policy, legislation, and curricular framework" (DM). The ubiquitous presence of social justice in the Scottish educational system obliges us to "know" that social justice is not just an add-on value, it is one of the central tenants of their educational philosophy.

Partner Empowerment

Institution-partner communication has improved across the years as four in the morning phone calls are no longer necessary to "catch" a headteacher between duties. Emails and virtual meetings have increased the convenience of communicating. The personal connections among partners and program faculty have changed as relationships have deepened. Despite these connections, we recognize that we must develop new relationships with potential partners whose only connection with us may be the reference of a current partner. We recognize the necessity for effective professional communication with our current partners and especially with new partners.

It has been gratifying that our communication with our partners has been a mutually satisfying and empowering experience. AM illustrates the benefit of our ability to effectively communicate, stating, "these discussions have supported my own professional development and professional courage to make the big changes required to benefit our children and our staff team." NS & MS found that "Skillful interaction from the UWEC placement students with the children placed at H and the ability to build positive relationships with them as well as staff" were positive outcomes. FS noticed "Communication is the fundamental basis of reciprocal relationships, and this factor has been key in maintaining the very special relationship which St. P has with the Special Education in Scotland program." Another aspect of effective professional communication is reflected in our shared dialogues.

Our conversations have evolved and will continue to do so as our relationships mature and grow. The depth of this collaboration has been unexpected, yet greatly cherished. Although we have an ocean between us, we have found the motivation to continue forward in fostering future possibilities. Beyond effective communication, there have been specialized dialogues which focus on our professional growth. AM noted the possibility for growth:

> I highly value the program and am keen to continue the relationship we have built over many years. I am keen to expand our partnership further to align with ongoing academic research being undertaken by the university as this would also support our improvement journey.

The professional aspect of this mutually empowering relationship is validated in moments of communication which happen outside of the formal

program as well: "Information sharing has continued beyond the program and has allowed our employees an opportunity to reframe their approaches and techniques through the help of our colleagues" (FS). MM focused on the broader experience: "We benefit so much from having the students here in O and from feedback to us from them, they benefit from their O experience and I hope that this reciprocal relationship lasts many years yet." Finally, AM expressed "it has been invaluable to talk to her about my plans for the strategic direction of the school and our service and to engage in critical discussions about this together."

These partnerships are priceless to the program's success and to us personally. The program's continuity and our own personal learning depend on nurturing these global relationships. Across the 'pond,' we seek to build a bridge that will continue to expand and support cultural understanding, professional skills and knowledge, and deep friendships. Beyond the faculty's and partner's growth, we will now explore how our Scotland IIE has influenced past participants.

## Mutual Engagement, Empowerment, and Empathy

Through participants' and partners' words, the mutuality of relationships which have grown from nearly 20 years of interaction is evident. Participants have grown personally and professionally, using what they have learned of the Scottish education system to inform their pedagogy and professional trajectory. Some participants have a deeper understanding of education as a form of social justice and can put that understanding to use in their classrooms. Other participants have specialized in teaching students with the most challenging emotional and behavioral needs. All participants cite their experiences in the Scottish schools as the central driving force behind their knowledge and skills.

The Scottish partners who have hosted participants in their home and schools the past two decades are the foundation from which participants' growth originates. While this is to be expected, it is surprising to learn how their interactions with participants and faculty from the US have influenced their practice as well. Through engaging with one another, both groups have grown in their empathy and have been empowered through programmatic changes. Partners are quick to acknowledge this growth and, considering how these interactions have also influenced the American institution which runs the IIE, it evident that these influences have been mutual.

# Implications

Recognizing the importance of mutual engagement, empowerment, and empathy carries implications for IIE programs and research. This section looks at these implications in terms of (a) special education-focused study abroad, (b) short-term IIE, (c) longitudinal research examining the impact of IIE programs on participants and partners, and (d) partner development.

Few special education-focused study abroad programs exist in the US, and just a single study examines this type of program (Johnson & Battalio, 2008). Future research should investigate the reason for this lack of representation in short-term IIE and potential solutions, as how internal and external support (i.e., financial, course release, tenure recognition, etc.) influence the development of such programs.

By examining a long-running, successful special education immersion experience, this study demonstrates the power that such programs can have – hence why such research is warranted. Programs can be done in ways that do not add time to degree for participants, expose participants to diverse systems of education, and flourish when given institutional support. While the program featured in this study did not receive strong institutional support initially, it would not have been able to continue and grow as it has without such support.

This study also shows the importance of viewing such programs as mutually beneficial partnerships fostering the CRT elements of engagement, empowerment, and empathy among students and faculty alike. Participants grew personally and professionally and were quick to identify their time in the program as having multiple direct influences on their professional practice. Partners praised their interactions with program faculty and participants and recognized the various mutual benefits realized from combining American and Scottish approaches to educating students with disabilities. These partnership elements provided a powerful, achievable way in which preservice teachers could develop the social justice and inclusion knowledge and skills necessary for their future role as classroom teachers.

This study also demonstrated that a short-term IIE program with an emphasis on partnership relations can have a long-term impact on participants and partners. While the literature is burgeoning with findings on the short-term experiences and the influence programs have soon after returning to country,

such longer-term findings are scant. Additional research investigating what aspects of the exchange have had the most influence can help in developing even stronger partnerships in the future.

Developing and maintaining international partnerships is central to our program and demonstrates a key takeaway in understanding the programs' success. Establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships with international partners has been a key factor in bringing about changes in partners' and participants' thinking and practice. Practitioners working to establish/maintain international partners should consider how the IIE can support participants in meeting standards, developing knowledge around social justice in education, and align with institutional vision. Additionally, research focusing on best practices for education-focused IIE should include identifying potential partners, developing programs, and sustaining practices for long-term program viability. This program has flourished because of its ongoing commitment to mutual benefits: partners, faculty, and participants engage in mutually engaging, empowering, and empathy-building interactions.

The growth of this IIE program does not just rest in our student participants personal and professional growth. If that were the case, the program would be less dynamic in nature. This IIE is ever evolving due to the relationships that have been developed, cherished, and sustained. Considering our program's 20-year history and the interweaving paths leading us through the ebb and flow of program development, we now find ourselves not at a denouement, but at a realization: we continue to move forward for our mutual benefit.

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**Rosemary Battalio**, PhD, is a professor emerita in the Department of Special Education and Inclusive Practices at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. She spent seventeen years leading preservice American teacher in the Special Education in Scotland program. Her motivation as an instructor was to teach preservice teachers skills which supported inclusive classroom environments. She concentrated on how to build positive classroom environments for all students, especially for those who demonstrated unique behavioral responses.