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Virtual Exchange in Teacher Preparation: Identifying and Disrupting Dangerous Narratives About the Middle East and North Africa Region

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of virtual exchange on disrupting dangerous narratives about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region among pre-service elementary teachers in the Midwestern region of the United States. The virtual exchange program provided direct interaction with teacher candidates in Morocco. Analysis of pre- and post-exchange memos revealed a significant shift from negative narratives to positive, generalized perceptions of the MENA region. While the shift towards positive generalizations represents progress, it also emphasizes the need for nuanced understanding and ongoing engagement. After participating in the exchange, pre-service teachers also communicated a strong desire to teach about the world and its people. This study highlights the possibilities of virtual exchange as a tool for preparing future educators who have been influenced by post-9/11 educational and media narratives. It advocates for the integration of virtual exchange as a mainstream approach to foster teaching for global understanding among teacher candidates.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the narratives of pre-service elementary teachers in the US concerning the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the shifts in these narratives resulting from participation in a virtual exchange (VE) with pre-service teachers in Morocco.

All students who are of traditional age and entering teacher preparation programs have spent 100% of their lives in a post-9/11 world and surrounded by the dangerous narratives it promoted about the MENA region. Their K-12 educational experiences about the world and its people have also been impacted by standardized testing regimes that marginalized social studies instruction and “expanding horizons” curriculum models (Akenson, 1987) that concentrated the focus of instruction for US students on the United States. We believe teacher preparation programs have a responsibility to acknowledge and mitigate the impact of dangerous narratives about the MENA region on future teachers’ readiness to teach for global understanding. We also believe that virtual exchange offers hope as a mainstreamed intervention in teacher preparation—an intervention requiring further study and thoughtful implementation. Therefore, this study examined the narratives future educators from the American Midwest held about the MENA region prior to participating in a mainstreamed virtual exchange, and the narrative shifts they experienced as a result of their engagement with pre-service teachers in Morocco.

1.1. Contact Hypothesis

Drawing from Allport’s Contact Hypothesis, our exchange and research are deeply rooted in Allport’s (1954) seminal work, which posited that positive interactions between diverse groups could lessen prejudices. Extending this research, Pettigrew and Tropp’s (2006) meta-analysis substantiated the hypothesis, demonstrating that well-planned intergroup contact can enhance attitudes and reduce prejudice, though they later acknowledged the challenges in maintaining these positive effects over time (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). In a novel approach, Turner and Crisp (2010) suggested that imagination could help maintain the benefits of intergroup contact.

Despite the foundational role of Allport's Contact Hypothesis in understanding prejudice reduction through intergroup interaction, subsequent research has highlighted significant limitations and challenges. Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) raised concerns that while direct contact addresses explicit biases, it may not completely tackle aversive racism, characterized by subtle, unintentional discrimination. Further, Dixon et al. (2005) highlighted how context and power dynamics play a crucial role in the effectiveness of intergroup contact. This view is supported by Barlow et al. (2012), who found that negative contact had a more substantial effect in increasing prejudice than positive contact had in reducing it, suggesting that not all intergroup interactions are beneficial. Hewstone and Swart (2011) expand on these nuances by incorporating emotional and cognitive factors, such as anxiety and empathy, which can mediate the effects of contact.

In the context of teachers' capacities to disrupt children's racial prejudices through contact, Nesdale et al. (2005) explored the influence of intergroup norms and perceived threats. Their findings underscored the role of societal norms and contextual factors in shaping intergroup attitudes, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, Cameron et al. (2006) studied the sustained effects of extended contact interventions on children's intergroup attitudes, and their findings suggest that extended contact can lead to sustained positive intergroup attitudes in children.

1.2. Virtual Exchange

In the digital era, virtual exchange has the potential to leverage Contact Hypothesis to help educators teach for global understanding in elementary and secondary schools. The term *virtual exchange* encompasses various definitions, often revolving around technology, sustainability, facilitators, and diverse participants (Baralt et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). For the purpose of this study, VE is defined according to O'Dowd (2018, p. 5),

virtual exchange involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators.

This definition has been adopted or adapted by many authors, including Weaver et al. (2022) and Whately et al. (2022).

Virtual exchange programs provide opportunities for learners to engage with diverse cultures, challenging biases and stereotypes and nurturing empathy and responsiveness (Akpovo et al., 2020; Arndt et al., 2021; Gleason & Cherrez, 2021.) And they have been used to teach for global understanding through a variety of subjects (Baralt et al., 2022; Eren, 2021). For example, Uzum et al. (2020) highlighted their use in fostering intercultural awareness through language learning VEs. Similarly, Devereux and Glenn (2022) implemented a VE in higher education for agricultural problem-solving, which also incorporated reflection on personal biases. Gleason and Cherrez (2021) designed a VE for pre-service teachers to enhance technology skills while also increasing global and intercultural awareness. These examples underscore how VE programs effectively blend primary educational goals with the promotion of intercultural understanding. Our study investigates the potential of a VE program mainstreamed into an elementary social studies methods course to disrupt pre-service teachers' biased narratives about the MENA region.

The theoretical basis of our study, rooted in Allport's Contact Hypothesis, as well as later work on the complexities of intergroup contact, highlight the potential for lasting positive effects of extended contact in shaping intergroup attitudes. In the digital era, virtual exchange offers a modern platform to apply these theories, aiming to disrupt biased narratives and promote global understanding. Our study examines the integration of virtual exchange in teacher preparation.

1.3. Positionality and the Impact of Dangerous Narratives About the MENA Region

In our positions as educators, we often learn and teach with cohorts of students and colleagues who share social identities similar to ours. Like us, many are White females from working-class families in the Midwest or southern parts of the United States. The K-12 education we received strongly emphasized nationalistic narratives (Bohan, 2005; Nelson, 1976; Westheimer, 2007; Westheimer, 2011). We studied curriculum that largely excluded Arab and Muslim peoples (Haste, 2010; Subedi, 2010), and many of us learned about the world and our place within it through elementary social studies standards that are traditionally based on the "expanding horizons" model (Brophy & Alleman,

2006; LeRiche, 1987) which can fail to foster cultural literacy and global understanding in some of our more homogeneous Midwestern communities (McCafferty-Wright, 2016).

Combined with the global education reform movement's marginalization of less/un-tested subjects such as social studies, our educations were ill-suited to disrupt the dehumanizing media narratives that depict Arab and Muslim peoples as inherently dangerous (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Beinin, 2010; Foody, 2018; Media Portrayals of Minorities Project, 2019; Said, 1978, 1980; Sensoy, 2010; Shaheen, 2012). Additionally, college students who are currently entering teacher preparation programs in a traditional fashion after high school were enculturated in a post-9/11 world and have spent up to 100% of their lives in a nation militarily engaged in the Middle East and North Africa region. Finally, increasing anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate crimes position global education and exchanges such as ours within broader anti-terrorist and anti-racist efforts. We are especially concerned that the K-12 educational environments of teacher candidates failed to support their readiness to teach for global understanding and cross-cultural collaboration.

1.4. Developing a Virtual Exchange

Interest in and use of virtual exchange (VE) programs increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Whately et al., 2022). In the spring of 2020, we hastily used Zoom to develop an informal series of Wednesday World Ed Chats in response to the "pandemic pivot" to distance learning (McCafferty-Wright & Kordic, 2020). At the end of this experience, we assembled a panel of trainers and administrators in Moroccan teacher preparation programs who advised us on the development of curriculum and helped us recruit Moroccan participants¹.

Given our interest in disrupting biased narratives of future teachers while building skills for cross-cultural collaboration, we used Contact Hypothesis to inform the design of our virtual exchange, and we incorporated a mutual intergroup differentiation model (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Hewstone & Brown, 1986) which considers diverse and overlapping identities while

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promoting common objectives. Our VE participants' differences include teachers from different places, with different professional areas of expertise (often secondary teachers of English in Morocco and elementary educators in the United States), and with different social identities and experiences. Their common objectives have included learning to teach for global understanding, developing a global professional network, and earning a certificate of completion.

Our sessions are designed to promote cross-cultural collaboration among pre-service teachers. Participants engage in activities such as writing collaborative poems, using a Photovoice project to share a day in our lives, comparing and contrasting education systems, and sharing resources from our own countries that educators in other countries can use. These activities foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse educational and cultural perspectives.

1.5. Goals of the Study

At the time of this study, our virtual exchange was entering its third year, and at least 600 new and future teachers had already participated in the exchange. We were rapidly growing and wanted to better understand the ways in which our VE was contributing to teacher preparation in our program. Our inquiry sought to identify: 1) the narratives preservice teachers in the American Midwest held about the MENA region; and 2) the ways in which those narratives shifted as a result of virtual exchange.

Although virtual exchange has the potential to generate data of an international nature, the goal of this study was to investigate the narratives of teacher candidates in the American Midwest regarding those who are from the MENA region.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study involved 13 alumni of the exchange program, all of whom were elementary education majors during their participation. The group consisted of 11 female (85%) and two male (15%) participants, all White and from rural or suburban backgrounds. Ten participants (77%) were aged 18-22, two (15%) were between 23 and 30 years, and one (8%) was in the 31-40 age bracket. All participants (100%) had prior experience using Zoom, but none had

previous involvement in virtual exchange programs. This VE program was their first such experience. All had completed the social studies methods course that housed the exchange in a previous semester. They entered the study by responding to a call and granting the researchers access to assignments they had submitted while participating in the exchange during a previous semester, including the pre- and post- exchange reflective memos that are the focus of this study. All 13 respondents were included in the study.

2.2. Components of the Virtual Exchange

The virtual exchange focused on the topic of teaching for global understanding and took place between students in a teacher preparation program at a Midwest college of education and students in Moroccan teacher preparation programs. Participants from the Midwest experienced the exchange as part of a social studies methods course.

We used a critical qualitative approach (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) to examine changes in pre-service teachers' written narratives regarding the MENA region. Our approach is critical in that we focused on how pre-service teachers' experiences with virtual exchange challenged biases. We analyzed themes reflecting participants' active engagement with cultural stereotypes and biases, including how participants actively questioned and revised their initial perceptions, emphasizing the transformative potential of virtual exchange in fostering critical cultural awareness and challenging entrenched narratives.

The exchange included three weekly meetings that occurred via Zoom. Each meeting lasted about two hours and included whole group instruction as well as breakout room activities. The curriculum for the exchange was developed by the Midwestern teacher training program in cooperation with a team of Moroccan teacher trainers. Weekly guiding questions for the exchange included:

- Week One: "How can we build inclusive classroom communities?" with a focus on introductions through poetry, Photovoice, and other methods;
- Week Two: "How did we learn about the world and its people?" with a focus on media analysis and map projections; and
- Week Three: "How can we teach for global understanding?" with a focus on globalizing curriculum goals and sharing resources from our own cultures.

Prior to the exchange, all participants in the Midwest completed reflective writing memos in response to questions such as "What comes to mind

when you think about the MENA region?” and “How did you feel when you first learned about our class’s virtual exchange?” Post exchange memos asked participants to revisit their earlier writings and identify their currently held narratives about the MENA region as well as changes in their narratives.

2.3. Analysis of Exchange Memos

The reflective memos produced by our participants were analyzed using a constant comparative method described by Boeije (2002). Each memo was initially coded independently, identifying key phrases and concepts related to participants’ understanding of the MENA region. Initial codes such as “emotional reactions” were applied to segments of text where participants expressed relevant thoughts or feelings. Following initial coding, all instances of each code were compared across different memos to explore variability and consistency in participants’ responses. During this step, we adjusted codes as necessary to account for new insights or nuances that emerged from the data. As we compared and coded more data, we condensed the initial codes into broader categories that captured overarching themes in the data. This involved integrating and refining codes to form categories that effectively represented the range of participants’ experiences and reflections. The outcomes of this phase were used to synthesize the overall impact of the virtual exchange on participants’ views, linking back to the theoretical frameworks that informed the study’s design.

3. Findings

Participants communicated a wide range of thoughts regarding the MENA region prior to participating in the VE. The most prominent themes of the pre-exchange memo included danger and safety, geography and culture, and emotional and social engagement with the exchange. After the virtual exchange, participants wrote memos reflecting on their thoughts, feelings, and responses to their initial narratives about the MENA region. These memos were analyzed to identify any shifts in their narratives. The analysis compared pre- and post-exchange memo content, focusing on changes in perceptions and understanding. Below, we describe the narratives connected to these themes and shifts in perceptions.

3.1. Danger and Safety

3.1.1. Pre-Exchange Perceptions

Danger was the most prevalent theme found throughout the first memo. Midwestern participants had dangerous associations with the MENA region and its peoples. Terms such as *terrorist*, *dangerous*, *scared*, *war*, *violent*, *9/11*, and *fear* were widely used. Some who mentioned these terms noted that not all Muslims are dangerous, but that this is what they were raised to believe. Participants who mentioned the above terms also noted that they were informed of these harmful ideas and beliefs through the media, specifically news reports. In addition to news reports, many participants mentioned learning about dangerous stereotypes through the Disney movie “Aladdin” and the book/play “Arabian Nights.” For example, one student notes that the movie “Aladdin” shows the MENA region as a place of danger and thievery. The general consensus among participants was a view of the MENA region and its people as dangerous and scary.

3.1.2. Post-Exchange Shifts

After the virtual exchange, participants recognized a substantial shift in their views of people from the MENA region. One participant expressed that their “... narrative about these people completely changed throughout the exchange... These people were highly intelligent, far from dangerous...”. While their views became more positive, with Moroccans described as “... so kind, so loving, so considerate,” it also represented a shift to a different kind of generalization. Overall, participants acknowledged that the VE helped them confront their biases.

3.2. Geographical and Cultural Understanding

3.2.1. Pre-Exchange Perceptions

Stereotypes and harmful narratives were frequently found throughout the first memo, especially regarding geography and culture. Geography comprised the second largest theme of the pre-exchange memos. Participants often mentioned specific locations including Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, the Nile River, and Sudan. Descriptions of the environment and habitat featured terms such as *hot*, *sandy*, *desert*, *dirt*, *camel*, and *sunshine* which suggested a common perception of an exclusively desert habitat, despite the region’s diverse coastal, mountain, and prairie landscapes.

While a few participants did acknowledge aspects such as oil, fishing, and ports, others generalized living conditions, describing small villages, huts, and buildings made of clay bricks, indicating a perception of the MENA region's inhabitants as poor. Religion was the last significant theme related to culture found throughout the first memos. Many participants mentioned they thought of "Muslims" and "Islam" when thinking of the MENA region. Many of the participants also brought up the clothing and coverings worn by some Muslim women, including *head coverings, hijabs, gowns, burkas, and beautiful jewelry*. Additionally, participants mentioned that Muslims were *strict, sexist, and modest*.

3.2.2. Post-Exchange Shifts

Before the virtual exchange, participants held various stereotypes about North Africa, the Middle East, and Muslims, imagining deserts, nomads, and small villages. However, post-VE reflections revealed a significant shift. Participants discovered striking similarities with Moroccans, bonding over shared interests such as Harry Potter, movies, music, and outdoor activities. They reported also sharing mutual concerns such as climate change, racism, and LGBTQ+ rights.

3.3. Emotional and Social Engagement

3.3.1. Pre-Exchange Perceptions

In the pre-exchange memos, participants expressed a spectrum of emotions about the MENA region and the upcoming virtual exchange (VE). Fear was prominent, with many participants reporting feeling *scared, nervous, confused, and fearful* about interacting with individuals from the MENA region. In contrast, there was also notable excitement. Descriptors such as *excited, hopeful, curious, optimistic, and shocked* were used. One participant shared, "I felt hopeful that we were truly heading towards a global education perspective... I also felt incredibly excited and still am to broaden my global horizons." Another conveyed emotional anticipation, saying, "I'm going to cry (GOOD TEARS)... I'm incredibly passionate about having a global perspective... The fact that we get to connect with other teachers in a different country means more to me than you will ever know." A different participant mentioned they would like to "gain more knowledge about a country and culture I know little about. I want to broaden my horizons...". Thinking about their future roles as educators, some wrote that they wanted to take the (anticipated) knowledge and friendships they made during the VE and apply it to their future classroom and teaching. These

varied emotions, ranging from fear to excitement and gratitude, underscore the complex feelings participants had entering the VE.

3.3.2. Post-Exchange Shifts

In the post-exchange memos, students expressed a heightened interest in learning more, growing personally, and embracing global understanding in their teaching. Participants expressed a keen interest in furthering their cultural education to enhance their future teaching. They communicated aspirations to grow in cultural awareness, with one noting the importance of this personal growth in being able to "...learn more so that I might be able to better teach my future students about the world they live in." Another participant reflected on the evolution of their own perspectives, stating, "Something that I have found as I have gotten older is that your thoughts and ideas can change and that is ok...". They emphasized a desire to instill this mindset in students, hoping to "... continue a cycle of knowledge, growth, and understanding." Another added that "... finding shared experiences is important for breaking down misconceptions...". This drive to use their experiences to nurture accepting and empathetic attitudes in their future students was a common thread among the participants.

4. Discussion

The pre-service teachers' reflections point to the transformative impact of virtual exchange on teacher candidates' most dangerous narratives about the MENA region and contribute to our understanding of how VE can be leveraged in teacher preparation programs. Initially, participants held narratives laden with negative stereotypes and biases, largely influenced by their media consumption, curriculum policies, and post-9/11 educational context. This prompted our application of Allport's Contact Hypothesis, mindful of its limitations (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2011). Notably, participation in the virtual exchange led to a shift in teacher candidates' communicated perceptions.

The outcomes observed in this study underscore the complex dynamics posited by Allport's Contact Hypothesis and its subsequent elaborations in intergroup relations literature. While Allport suggested that positive interactions between groups could reduce prejudices under specific conditions—such as equal group status, common goals, and institutional support—the virtual exchange context provides a unique platform to test these

conditions in a mediated environment. The findings demonstrate that even in short-term interactions, significant shifts in perception can occur, highlighting the potential for virtual exchanges to foster conditions favorable to prejudice reduction. However, as noted by researchers like Dovidio and Gaertner (2000), such interventions must be carefully designed to address not only overt prejudices but also subtler forms of bias such as aversive racism, which can persist even after positive intergroup contact. This suggests a need for ongoing engagement beyond initial interactions, as supported by Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) findings that prolonged contact is more likely to result in lasting attitude changes. The shift from negative stereotypes to more positive yet simplified generalizations among participants illustrates the initial success of contact but also the necessity for sustained and nuanced engagement to cultivate a deeper, more accurate understanding of diverse groups.

We understand that a three-week virtual exchange cannot lead to regional expertise, nor was that our goal. Contact served as a relatively quick intervention to disrupt the most dangerous narratives that teacher candidates held about the cultures and geographies of the MENA region. While we welcome this effect of the virtual exchange, we must also acknowledge that for the participants of this study, the exchange led to different kinds of generalizations. The findings reveal that after the VE, teacher candidates began to view individuals from the MENA region as "kind, loving, and considerate," echoing the findings of Cameron et al. (2006) regarding positive intergroup attitudes resulting from contact. This shift from negative stereotypes to positive generalizations, while an improvement, still involves oversimplification. It also highlights the malleability of narratives and the need for continued exposure and nuanced understanding, especially as the participants will still live in a media environment that promotes fear and stereotypes.

Virtual exchange can play a role in preparing future educators to teach for global understanding. The study underscores the effectiveness of VE programs in disrupting dangerous narratives as a mainstreamed part of teacher preparation. Teacher candidates exhibited growth in their understandings of the MENA region, resonating with the broader literature on the role of virtual exchange in breaking down cultural barriers (Baralt et al., 2022; Devereux & Glenn, 2022; Eren, 2021; Gleason & Cherrez, 2021; Uzum et al., 2020). This research also reinforces the crucial role of teacher preparation programs in addressing harmful narratives, suggesting that virtual exchange can be a

powerful tool in preparing future educators for teaching in a complex and globally interconnected world. Also important, our participants communicated an increased desire to teach about the world and its people, addressing a significant deficit that they identified in their own K-12 educations.

This study reaffirms the relevance of Contact Theory in virtual settings, demonstrating that direct interaction with diverse groups, even digitally, can reduce prejudice and promote understanding for some of the most dangerous narratives held by post-9/11 educators. Additionally, it indicates the potential for virtual exchange to become a mainstream intervention in teacher preparation. Moving forward, we recommend that teacher preparation programs consider mainstreaming intercultural contact through virtual exchange in multiple required courses with an emphasis on disrupting pre-service teachers' most dangerous narratives prior to the start of their careers.

The transformative shifts observed in teacher candidates' perceptions through the virtual exchange highlight the imperative for embedding such programs within teacher education curricula. This strategic inclusion addresses the urgent need to dismantle enduring stereotypes and equips future educators with essential skills for cultivating inclusive classrooms. To this end, education faculties should forge international partnerships, offering authentic intercultural exchange opportunities akin to the VE demonstrated in this study. Such experiences empower pre-service teachers to critically engage with and refine their perspectives on global cultures within a structured, educational framework. This approach has the potential to disrupt dangerous narratives on a broad scale through teacher preparation.

We recommend continued scholarship on the narratives held by new generations of teacher candidates and targeted interventions, including those which employ contact through virtual exchange. Future research should focus on identifying effective practices with teacher candidates and the long-term effects of virtual exchange on teaching practices and student outcomes. We also recommend collaborations with scholars from multiple sides of the exchange (in our case, from Morocco) for a more complete understanding of how participants experience virtual exchange and its longer-term impact, and we are currently collaborating with scholars from the MENA region who are interested in data generated by the participation of teacher candidates from Morocco and Libya, a recent addition to our exchange.

5. Limitations

This study's findings are limited by its small sample size of 13 participants, all from the same Midwestern teacher preparation program and predominantly female and White, which may not reflect the diversity of teacher candidates nationally or internationally. Although we would have preferred more participants, the narrow focus of our research questions and the relative homogeneity of our participant group—all pre-service teachers from the same teacher training program and institution—a sample size of 13 was sufficient for reaching data saturation. Additionally, the study focuses on a single geographic location, limiting the applicability of findings to different educational and socio-political contexts. The three-week duration of the virtual exchange also raises questions about the sustainability of observed changes in narratives. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and longer-term studies to assess the enduring impacts of virtual exchanges on intercultural understanding.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study indicate that many pre-service teachers hold dangerous narratives about the Middle East and North Africa region. Further, virtual exchange can have a marked disruption of these dangerous narratives, however they may be replaced with a different set of overgeneralizations, all be they positive. Additionally, the teacher candidates who participated in our virtual exchange reported a commitment to teaching for global understanding. These findings highlight the need for ongoing engagement and reflection in virtual exchange programs to achieve a more nuanced cultural understanding, thereby contributing to the development of educators who are better prepared to disrupt the dangerous narratives of their future students.

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