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The International Experiences of First-Year Teachers

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Every year, a number of preservice teachers graduate from Canadian universities, are hired into international positions, and spend their first year of teaching adapting to a new career and a new country. In addition to adjusting to the expectations of a new culture, they must also deal with the stress and joy of the first year of teaching in their own classrooms. Individually, each of these experiences is life changing; together they represent a unique experience. Many of these students remain in touch with professors and colleagues and tell stories rich with reflection and description of this first year in an unfamiliar country. Correspondence and conversations ring with professional and personal insights and choruses of "I wish I had known...". Editors Carole and Warnie Richardson's belief in the importance of hearing first-year teachers tell their stories of international teaching and learning is rooted in their own practice. As preservice professors who taught in the public school system on a small Caribbean island, they have experienced firsthand the challenges and rewards of living in an unfamiliar cultural environment and teaching in an educational system much different from their own. When they moved from Canada to the Cayman Islands to teach in the public system, their world changed as they adapted to a very different way of life, both personally and professionally. As seasoned educators, the editors were able to use their previous teaching experiences and ongoing reflective practice to identify and understand the dissonances, both internal and external, that resulted from working to fit into their new surroundings without losing themselves or compromising their philosophical beliefs about education. They were able to recognize that certain conflicts within their classrooms related as much to their students' and colleagues' anxiety about their expectations as to their own anxiety about what was expected of them. Conversations with each other and with expatriate teachers helped the editors to understand that their latent desire to implement their well-developed teaching practice in a new environment signaled an unconscious unwillingness to adapt to change; rather, they assumed that their new environment would adapt to them. As the editors began to acknowledge that change within their practice was vital to success in their new environment, they developed new expectations, new relationships, and new understandings that contributed to their becoming part of the culture and community. They also grew as educators as they began to appreciate that to effectively communicate with their students, they needed to validate the students' individual realities, even as they expected them to embrace theirs. The editors realized that there was no right way to adapt to change; the willingness to expand their ability to see through the eyes of others was the key to successful teaching and learning-regardless of the culture. The narratives in this book honor the voices of the individuals as they tell the personal and professional stories that live behind surveys and numbers. They speak frankly of the difficulties faced and triumphs experienced while beginning a career in a new country. Each of the stories chronicles a very different journey, and we hear these young teachers begin to reflect on their personal growth and come to a greater understanding of what it is to be a teacher-regardless of the country and the educational system. All of the stories reflect the personal backgrounds and styles of their authors, and it is in these differences that this book finds its strengths. Ultimately, these stories provide glimpses into the lives of first-year teachers who venture beyond the defined borders of their country-and their comfort. This book is critical for all those in education.

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