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PhD Student

International Education/Education Leadership

George Mason University

Portfolio I

**Updated Goals Statement**

*“Human beings are born into a particular culture and context that influence and drive what they understand to be valued, real, and significant.”*

*(Mikulasek, 2020a)*

Areas of interest: international immersion programs; experiential education; intercultural and global competency; leadership; team cohesion; applied organizational theory; organizational development; teacher training; international development; national education policy and practice

My passion behind the pursuit of this PhD in International Education/Education Leadership continues to be grounded in my original Goals Statement, “I am passionate about integrating global awareness, understanding, and shared compassion among our next generations in the hope of minimizing bias, prejudice, and assumptions in our communities” (Mikulasek, 2020). My intended area of specialization is building intercultural and global competency among school leaders, particularly teachers, as part of the broader effort to internationalize education. Specifically, my overarching research interest is how intentionally organized groups within academic settings, and more specifically, immersion programs, instigate and can sustainably and positively increase intercultural and global competency among participants.

My professional aspirations and research interests have been informed, refined, and developed during my coursework in the International Education/Education Leadership (IEEL) doctoral program. For example, while my original Goals Statement articulated a research interest in immersion programs, I had not considered several factors such as: the nature of the group as part of the process of building intercultural and global competency; the definitions of the terms of “intercultural and global competency”; the role of the instructor teaching immersion programs as a key leader instigating and advancing intercultural and global competency; the need to increase competency among other school leaders such as principles, superintendents, and so forth; and the language of ontology and epistemology.

To that end, my research interest areas and topics have expanded and further developed since my original Goals Statement to include the following:

1. Comparing and contrasting different types of international immersion programs, including study abroad programs, short term and long-term programs, faculty led programs, third party-sponsored international programs, and so forth
2. Exploring how immersion programs embody and can capture best practices found in experiential education
3. Examining the role of the leader of an immersion program, including what type of leadership best facilitates the adoption and integration of intercultural and global competency
   1. To what extent does a leader need coaching and organizational development skills and experience?
4. Understanding group dynamics in an international immersion program context, and how to cultivate a group in which the group members and the group as a whole contributes to a shared transformational experience in learning and building intercultural and global competencies
5. Defining intercultural and global competency, and how to/what factors to consider when measuring increases in such competency
   1. What does intercultural competency look like? How do we measure it?
6. Assessing if/how teacher training may or may not include intercultural and global competency intentional training and experiences, and how to integrate such competency training into pre-service training
   1. Does teacher education need to be shifted? Is intercultural education absent?
   2. To what extent is there a difference between culturally responsive teachers and principals and intercultural competency?
7. Determining how to design and implement immersion programs for in-service teachers and other school leaders that lead to improved intercultural and global competency, including subsequent application within their professional (and personal) environments
   1. How do we ensure sustainability? How is intercultural development an on-going practice? What might a continuum of practice look like?
8. Analyzing what components of an immersion experience most positively build intercultural and global competency, and can/how these components be integrated into organized experiences within local or regional communities.
   1. How can we optimize the transformation, the consciousness-altering process (Yershova, DeJaegbere, & Mestenabuser, 2000), of cultural awareness, cognition, and affect?
9. Assessing national education policies and how they incorporate soft skill learning such as intercultural and global competency learning
10. Looking at how the success of social-emotional learning is informed by a teacher’s competency in cultures and global issues

These research questions are sourced from my interests in both who we are, our “being,” and what we do, our “doing,” which are integral to the development of our intercultural awareness, understanding, knowledge, and acceptance. Our “being” relates to both our ontological and epistemological perspectives grounded in our knowledge, characteristics, instincts, and culture – summarily evident in our attitudes; our “doing” considers our actions, behaviors, and skills. My epistemological approach is currently aligned most closely with the post-structuralist epistemology, which I reviewed in my New Ways of Knowing research paper completed in Summer 2020. This approach “argues that how we know is dependent on our specific socio-cultural contexts, histories, language, assumptions, and background. An individual’s particular lens, or framework, defines how, and ultimately what, we know” (Mikulasek, 2020a). My ontology views reality as relational, which closely aligns with my interest in a systemic approach to organizational theory and a transformational leadership approach. With this focus on cultural relativity, my research methods of most interest are qualitative in nature, particularly narrative, life stories, phenomenology, semi-structured interviews, and so forth.

In short, I want to be an expert in how to foster and deepen intercultural and global competencies through immersion programs and other intentionally organized experiences.

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My professional purpose of pursing this PhD also is consistent with my previous Goals Statement, which is to pursue a combination of three possible tracks: first, to teach in higher education institutions, including overseas institutions; second, to organize, lead and teach immersion programs for undergraduate and graduate students, particularly pre-service or in-service teachers, principals, and other school leaders; and third, to consult with school districts, state education departments, Department of Education, and Ministries of Education on how to integrate intercultural and global competency learning. As a Foreign Service Officer with USAID and a former business owner, I want to leverage and apply these professional experiences to both academia and consulting; simultaneously, I recognize my greatest strengths and offers to students and universities will be less my nascent publication record, given my late start in academia, and more my applied expertise and experience in building effective engagement and partnerships between and among diverse cultures and peoples; deep knowledge of cultural and global issues; and organizational development and professional coaching experience. While I am interested in and intend to conduct research and literature reviews, my orientation is applied research: how will I take what I and others have learned and apply this knowledge to building intercultural and global competency?

To that end, my preference is to obtain a full-time position at a university, in which my role is to teach and lead immersion programs for students, and if possible, particularly pre-service teachers. Given the challenges and limitations of securing a tenure-track faculty or staff position at an American university, however, I am also highly interested in pursuing semester or year-length faculty positions at international universities with a particular focus on the developing world. My intended area of teaching would be intercultural skill development and global studies; organizational and leadership development toward building intercultural competency; teaching intercultural classrooms; role of organizational groups to build peace and reduce conflict; and other similar courses. In this capacity, I also would actively seek to build partnerships between international and American universities to increase student and faculty exchanges.

In addition, I am also considering serving as an independent business owner seconded to universities seeking to offer pre-service teachers and other adult students immersion opportunities; in this capacity, I may be named an Adjunct Professor able to offer students university credit and allow students to use financial aid to cover the cost of the program, a method I implemented at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey in 1999/2000. In either role (university faculty member or independent business operator), I hope to be leading several immersion programs annually.

Further, and particularly if I am working in an international university, I will seek opportunities to offer and respond to local, regional, or national efforts to increase intercultural and global competency development within their university curriculum and programs.

My work is ultimately focused on finding better and more productive ways of peacefully living with and in respect of our differences. I am passionate about understanding the lens through which others see and interpret the world, and how to expand that lens to incorporate the views of others, thereby hopefully generating increased empathy, curiosity, shared respect, and tolerance.

The following graph offers a visualization on how I see my professional and academic experiences folding and intersecting together to meet these objectives:

Mikulasek, S. (2020). Goals statement. Application to George Mason University

Mikulasek, S. (2020a). New ways of knowing final. EDLE 800.

Yershova, Y., DeJaeghere, J., & Mestenhauser, J. (2000). Thinking not a Usual: Adding the

Intercultural Perspective. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *4*(1), 39–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/102831530000400105