Reflections on a Collaborative Project between Elementary Students from an International School and Students from a Host Country

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Education
In Curriculum and Instruction
University of Regina

by
Stephanie Lynn Sawchuk
Regina, Saskatchewan
October, 2013

Copyright 2013: S.L. Sawchuk
Stephanie Lynn Sawchuk, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, has presented a thesis titled, *Reflections on a Collaborative Project between Elementary Students from an International School and Students from a Host Country*, in an oral examination held on August 30, 2013. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

**External Examiner:** Dr. Laurie Carlson Berg, Educational Psychology  
**Co-Supervisor:** Dr. Carol Fulton, Curriculum and Instruction  
**Co-Supervisor:** *Dr. Mhairi B. Maeers, Curriculum and Instruction*  
**Committee Member:** **Dr. Patrick Lewis, Curriculum and Instruction**  
**Committee Member:** *Dr. Barbara McNeil, Curriculum and Instruction*  
**Chair of Defense:** Dr. Ronald Camp, Faculty of Business Administration

*Not present at defense  
**Participated via Video Conference*
Abstract

This thesis is an autoethnographic self-study intended to create conversations amongst educators teaching in international schools overseas, and to possibly bring about change in the way we, as expatriate teachers, view service learning; in the way we attempt to incorporate the host culture, and in the way we promote intercultural literacy with young students.

The participants in this study included 17 international school students, aged seven to nine, who collaborated with 25 local students of the same age, on five separate occasions to plan and implement environmental projects in the local community. While mainly project-based and experiential, responsible citizenship through environmental activism added the element of service learning. The service-learning component met the curricular standards of citizenship in social studies and the environment in science.

Teaching the concept of responsible citizenship to young students who are not actually citizens of the country in which they are residing, is a complex task for an educator. Research on integrating the participation of students from the host culture with elementary students in an international school setting, is scant and therefore invites further research.

This is the story of my journey as an expatriate living in a fascinating country, and my attempt to navigate through the implementation of this multi-faceted project. The study revealed the importance of authentic relationships and reflective practice as the most necessary components for this type of research project.
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation and thanks to my advisor Dr. Carol Fulton, one of my very first professors in an education course. Her encouragement, support, and infinite knowledge have helped me through the journey of this thesis, as well as my journey as an educator. Thank you to Dr. Patrick Lewis, who has also facilitated my learning journey that has led me to the valuable discovery of reflective practice.

Thank you to Dr. Barbara McNeil who planted the activist spark that has led me to deeper pedagogical exploration.

I would also like to thank the participants in this study, especially my co-teacher in Tunisia for her patience and cooperation as we struggled with language barriers. Her willingness to trust and take a risk with me was the success of this endeavor. Thank you to my translators, especially Mejdi Belhadj Ali, who provided fascinating insights and discussions about culture and education. He also provided the word إنسجام “ensi’jam” which means harmony and unity, a word he felt reflected this project.

Thank you to the countries of Nepal and Tunisia, especially the people, for granting me patience and for providing me with understanding, friendship, and valuable lessons in a life-long quest to be a better person.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family: Barry Sawchuk, Dianne Sawchuk, Chantel Sawchuk, Cindy Sawchuk, Jean and Peter Sawchuk, and Anne and Steve Skebo.

The most difficult dedication to write is to my sisters because words cannot express how you truly are my everything.

I am grateful for my dad, Barry, who never hesitates to tell me how proud he is of me. All those years spent in his school and watching how he interacted and was loved by all colleagues and students greatly influenced my decision to become an educator.

To my mom Dianne, who was diagnosed and survived cancer during the beginning stages of this thesis. She remained a truly thoughtful and caring mom as she pushed me to work on the literature review while I sat next to her during her chemotherapy treatments.

To Grandma and Grandpa. They are my inspiration on so many levels. I will forever admire the pure strength of my Grandma.

To N and P, whom I miss every single day. They are the foundation for everything I do that is good.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i  
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................ ii  
Dedication ............................................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... iv  
List of Figures ......................................................................................................................... vi  
List of Appendices ................................................................................................................ vii  
Chapter One- Introduction ................................................................................................. 1  
  Background ......................................................................................................................... 2  
  Setting ................................................................................................................................. 2  
  The International School ................................................................................................. 3  
  The Students ..................................................................................................................... 4  
  My Story ............................................................................................................................ 5  
  The Project ....................................................................................................................... 7  
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 10  
  The Process ..................................................................................................................... 10  
  Rationale for the Project ............................................................................................... 11  
  Research Methodology- Autoethnographic Self-Study ............................................... 14  
  Theoretical Perspective ............................................................................................... 15  
  Limitations to Study .................................................................................................. 17  
Chapter Two- Literature Review ..................................................................................... 18  
  The Students ................................................................................................................... 18  
  The Faculty .................................................................................................................... 21  
  The International School Curriculum ......................................................................... 22  
  Intercultural Literacy .............................................................................................. 24  
  Experiential Learning, Project Based Learning, and Service Learning .................... 25  
  Project Based Learning .......................................................................................... 26  
  Service Learning ......................................................................................................... 27  
  Service- Learning Models and Components ................................................................ 29  
Chapter Three- Research Paradigm and Design ........................................................... 32  
  Theoretical Framework: Transformative/Critical ...................................................... 32  
  Research Method: Qualitative Research .................................................................... 33  
  Narrative Research ..................................................................................................... 34  
  Autoethnography and Self Study ............................................................................... 35  
  Participants ..................................................................................................................... 36  
  Research Methodology .............................................................................................. 37  
  Data Collection ........................................................................................................... 37  
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................... 38  
  Validity .......................................................................................................................... 39  
  Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................... 40  
Chapter Four- The Project ............................................................................................... 42
The Planning Phase.............................................................................................. 42
The First Visit ..................................................................................................... 42
The Second Visit ............................................................................................... 45
The Third Visit .................................................................................................... 47
The Fourth Visit .................................................................................................. 49
The Fifth Visit ...................................................................................................... 49
The Last Visit ....................................................................................................... 50
Research Findings ............................................................................................... 50
   Thinking Critically ............................................................................................. 51
   Using SL Models ............................................................................................... 53
   Understanding Cultural Experiences and Embracing the “Inshallah” ........... 54
Examining the School .......................................................................................... 56
Challenging Perceptions ...................................................................................... 57

Chapter Five- Reflection ..................................................................................... 59
Reflections on Research Goal and Questions ..................................................... 60
   Meeting Curriculum Standards ....................................................................... 61
   Participating in Experiential Learning ......................................................... 62
   Developing Intercultural Literacy ................................................................... 62
   Student Reflections and Motivation ............................................................. 63
Reflections on the Research Process and My Practice ...................................... 63
   Autoethnography and Respect for the Host Community .............................. 63
   Trust .................................................................................................................. 64
   Language Challenges ...................................................................................... 64
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 65
Afterwards ........................................................................................................... 66
References ........................................................................................................... 69
Appendices .......................................................................................................... 77
List of Figures

Figure 1. Meta-cognitive experiential learning

.................................................................26
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Research ethics approval.................................................................77
Appendix B: Research project consent form for participants.................................78
Appendix C: Translation of research consent form to French..................................79
Appendix D: Interview questions for international educators.................................80
Appendix E: Interview questions for educators in partner school............................81
Chapter One-Introduction

The stories we write put us into conversation with ourselves as well as with our readers. In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values. We take measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions, and the multiple layers of experience. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748)

Background

The question: What is the purpose of schools and what should be taught is a conundrum that many people connected to education have asked, and continue to ask. Nearly 20 years ago, Jane Roland Martin (1996, p. 4) suggested that, “there’s too much to teach” and asked, “what should be taught?” She realized the question was too difficult given the abundance of potential subject matter. Since then, with globalization, technology and other significant changes in society, the question grows seemingly more complex as “the traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by [economic, ecological and] social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools” (Noddings, 2005, p.173). The questions of what is the purpose of schools and what should be taught are further complicated and perhaps compounded for international schools, which are located in one place yet often convey the curricular standards from another place. Just as educators in so-called “regular” school systems are asked to “perennially question and reflect upon our institutions and practices to ensure that they
are alive and dynamic in our efforts to meet the changing needs of the young and our community” (Lewis, 2004, p. 231), so too must teachers in international schools question their practices. International school teachers, however, must also consider the needs of the host communities. My reflections on this issue led me to undertake this study.

This self-study—an autoethnography—is a story that unfolded during a multifaceted pedagogical quest. The purpose of the study was to discover effective ways for me, an educator in an international school, to build a respectful, collaborative relationship between the children in and international school and children in the host country. I also attempted to teach responsible citizenship and caring for the environment while promoting intercultural awareness using Project Based Learning (PBL), and/or Service Learning (SL), with elementary students. Because I was working in a different culture from my own and wanted to understand my own biases and role as teacher in this context, I chose to conduct an autoethnography, which is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand one’s experience in a different cultural setting (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As this autoethnography will describe, the country and people of Tunisia, the students, and my Tunisian colleagues, provided me with new insights into teaching in an international context.

Setting

Tunisia. With the Mediterranean Sea in the North, and the Sahara Desert in the South, words cannot describe the beauty of this country. It needs to be experienced with all of the senses. Tunisia remained a relatively unknown, quiet country until January 2011 when it gained immediate fame as the birthplace of the Arab Spring and The
Jasmine Revolution. What was once a seemingly peaceful Northern African country from an outsider’s point of view, certainly caused a media explosion, as a revolution erupted and the then president and dictator of 23 years was overthrown after a series of events and protests, all beginning with a local vegetable vender’s self-immolation. Living in this country during the revolution was chaotic and overwhelming. As most Tunisians began to celebrate freedom and a quest for democracy, the rest of the world, myself included, observed with anticipation, mixed emotions, and relief that the people were finally able to gain their freedom. While many expatriates celebrated with the Tunisians, many of my colleagues and I wondered if or how the revolution would affect the status of our international school. Presently, the country continues to struggle and change after that monumental shift from dictatorship to democracy, leaving my international school with an unpredictable future.

The International School

Mary Hayden (2006) suggests that there is not a definition of an international school that can encompass all of what these schools are, due to varying interpretations. While there can be many similarities among schools that call themselves an international school, the differences vary too greatly to be narrowed to one definition. Many are categorized as private, non-profit schools, opened by, or in cooperation with the United States Embassy. They may also be opened by private companies and are sometimes for-profit schools. These schools are usually located in different countries around the world. The international school where this study took place is associated with the United States Embassy and is a non-profit school.
The school was opened in the 1950’s and currently hosts approximately 60 different nationalities from around the world. There is a population of nearly 600 students from pre-kindergarten to Grade 12. Once inside the high, white concrete walls and secured gates, the school is a bustling place with facilities that spread over a seven-acre space. Outside of the gates, it is not easily identified as a school, for security reasons, and one of my Tunisian friends commented on his first visit, “This is your school? I think it looks like a prison.” His comment made me realize that student collaborative projects outside of the school are especially important in order to challenge similar perceptions and misconceptions about an international school, its staff, and students.

**The Students**

Many of the students attending international schools are often referred to as “Third Culture Kids” (Useem & Downey, 1976) or “Global Nomads” (McCaig, 1994). Typically these students “are the children of diplomats, missionaries, business persons, and military personnel, who live outside of their native country for periods of time” (Gillies, 1998, p. 36). Many of the students attending international schools identify not only with the culture of their parents, but also with the culture where they are living, and the expatriate culture within the country where they are residing. The expatriate culture within the country often includes people from multiple countries, who have a social network within the host country. Due to their transient lifestyle and their experiences living in other countries, many of students in international schools share an atypical profile such as being more mature, socially conscious, and having an expanded multicultural perspective (Gillies, 1998; McCaig, 1994). Because the so-called typical
students who attend international schools display some unique characteristics, these student profiles can be advantageous to teachers who wish to try new forms of pedagogy. Furthermore, with the myriad of international backgrounds within the classrooms, teachers have the opportunity on a daily basis to help students learn from various perspectives within the classroom and within curriculum. This was my goal.

**My Story**

After 10 years of teaching in the same school division in Saskatchewan, I realized I was becoming stagnant in both my personal and professional life. I knew that traveling rejuvenated and challenged me and this led me to the decision to teach overseas. I had been trying to visit Nepal, and had harboured an almost obsessive fascination for this country I had not yet visited. I attempted to visit Nepal to do a trek, but got only as far as Thailand because of the Nepali royal massacre and subsequent upheaval in 2001, which made it somewhat dangerous for tourists at that time. Consequently, I applied to the only international school in Kathmandu. After a very generic response from the Director, I decided to call him, as I did not get the sense from his email that he was considering me as a serious candidate. Luckily, he saw the bold phone call and conversation as assertive, as opposed to aggressive, and granted me an interview in Vancouver and I landed a very coveted position teaching fifth grade in Nepal. This is where the seed for my research topic germinated and began to grow.

The decision to conduct a self-study evolved as I wrestled with many issues, both as an educator, and an expatriate. As a white female having lived and worked in Canada all my life, the transition to living in a developing country was fascinating and overwhelming. The immense poverty moved me to start volunteering in an orphanage
almost immediately. After reflecting one evening in my journal, I had the enlightening experience of realizing what an imposition I had made by acting on what I believed the children needed from me, instead of communicating with them and including them in the planning of the activities. I felt I had good intentions and the phrase, “but I had the best of intentions” resurfaced many times throughout my life and actions as an expatriate, only to finally realize that good intentions are not sufficient, and many meaningful experiences and relationships can be missed. For example, during one field trip called “Explore Nepal”, which was a week-long trip into a Nepali Village, my students met with children from a local school for a reading activity in which they shared both Nepali and English books. By the end of the activity, the students seemed to be comfortable and there was more natural interaction. Then, we left. The students got along together so well, but they only met that one time. I felt I had missed an incredible opportunity by treating this as an isolated event. My intentions, once again, were good, but remained isolated and incredibly shallow. “Explore Nepal” took on a new meaning for me. I wanted to “explore” the potential. I wondered,

*How might I help my students experience life outside of the private school walls with a meaningful project or service in the community, but from a partnership perspective as opposed to a giving and receiving relationship?*

This question followed me from Nepal to Tunisia. While in Nepal, I became interested in the idea of intercultural awareness, host culture collaboration, and service learning (SL). I thought at first that my responsibility as a teacher would be to explore the intricacies of integrating the participation of a host culture within the classroom. Later, when I moved to Tunisia, where this research took place, I began to read literature that takes a critical
perspective on SL, and I realized I could be participating in cultural invasion through my projects if I did not consider the views and wishes of the host community. Therefore, I decided my next project would include the wishes of the host community while ever mindful of Freire’s words:

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions withstanding. (Freire, 2009, p. 95)

The Project

After leaving Nepal I accepted a position in an international school in Tunisia and decided to try implementing an extended project there. The project in Tunisia had multiple components. The first component was for me to try to find ways to integrate an understanding of the host country’s histories, languages, traditions, values and ways of life—its culture—into my program, as I was always a strong believer in this aspect of education for expatriates living overseas. The second component was to promote intercultural literacy. Intercultural literacy is defined as the, “understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for cross-cultural engagement” (Heyward, 2002, p. 10). Thirdly, I wanted to have the second graders participate in PBL by doing some type of project within the community that tied directly to the standards in the school’s curriculum. At my school, the second grade social studies and science standards and performance indicators from our curriculum that match this type of project are:
Students will:

- understand cultural and intellectual developments and interactions among societies.
- describe the expectations of how to act in one’s own culture and home country, and compare this with behavioral expectations of other cultures.
- understand why societies create and adopt systems of governance and how they address human needs, rights, responsibilities, and citizenship.
- explain rights and responsibilities of the individual in relation to his or her social group, including the characteristics of good citizens.
- explain reasons for the importance of leadership and service.
- identify various principles used for decision-making and problem solving (fairness, cooperation, fairness, individual responsibility, etc.)
- understand that human decisions and activities have a profound impact on the physical and living environments.
- describe how humans, as individuals or communities, change environments in ways that can be either helpful or harmful for themselves and other organisms.

This curriculum posed a challenge for me as an educator. First, many of my students did not identify with a single “home country”, which is typical with many Third Culture Kids. I therefore needed to use the host country as the real life example. However, this country had just ousted their dictator, and unveiled his many crimes such as manslaughter and drug trafficking. Because of this, teaching examples such as how government “addressed human needs, rights, responsibility and citizenship” was going to
be a challenge for students at this young age. Therefore, I knew I needed to look at instructional approaches from a “grass roots” perspective where citizens work together to create the kind of community or country they want, and highlight “characteristics of good citizens”, by collaborating with the local students and community.

As well, the curriculum seemed to integrate well with PBL, leading the students to an understanding that, “human decisions and activities have had a profound impact on the physical and living environments”. Because the students became environmentally active with their projects which took place in the community and were for the community, PBL became SL. I now had a sense of direction related to the curriculum, but I needed some guidance for implementing projects, so, as well as my own researching of the relevant literature, I referred to my professional development experiences and resources materials from conferences.

Many international conferences I attended had addressed the topic of community service and SL, but they mainly provided ideas for secondary teachers to implement, or they focused the discussions around the Culture, Action, Service program, which is part of the International Baccalaureate for secondary level students. None addressed these topics for elementary students. I realized the students and I would be “laying down a path in walking” (Varela, 1987, p. 48) as we made our way on this journey.

The journey was set to begin, but in Tunisia, all projects or collaborations between public schools and foreign agencies, such as our school, must be approved by the Tunisian Education Ministry. Due to the Revolution in January of 2011 however, there were no ministries and the democratic elections were set for October, so the partnership was postponed. I was disappointed, but then realized this was the first
democratic election the country had ever seen. History was unfolding around me. My project seemed trivial in comparison to the world changing events in the country! Thus, data collection began in January 2012, and was guided by my research questions.

**Research Questions**

The goal of this research was to build a respectful relationship between the children in an international school and children in the host country through a collaborative citizenship project. The project was to include environmental SL, citizenship, participation of the host community, and intercultural literacy for elementary students. I posed the following questions:

1. How might I engage my students in a SL project in the local community in a way that honours the needs and wishes of the community?
2. How will I ensure my students see themselves as co-creators of the service with the community rather than service providers?
3. How will I know if the participation of the local community in a collaborative project is a valuable pedagogical approach for students in an international school?

**The Process**

A local school was chosen, mainly because my contact knew the Director, and 42 second graders, aged 7-9 years old, met on five different occasions to collaborate and implement environmental projects in the community. The process was a four-step cycle. The first step was to gather the students for a visit to get to know one another. Second, we met to discuss environmental concerns in the community and create ideas for possible action plans. Next, we had to implement a common agreed-upon idea, and the fourth step
was to reflect. This cyclical format happened twice, providing for at least five visits together, but the reflection component was done separately due to language differences. The actual teaching about the environment in the science curriculum did not happen collaboratively, but separately, in our own schools and languages. The students then brought their ideas together (second visit) and after a discussion, they completed an idea handout. They overwhelmingly agreed that the garbage and litter in the community was an issue and that a clean-up would be a suitable activity. The third visit together resulted in a beach clean-up. The second cycle happened in a similar way, but more emphasis was on the Tunisian school’s curriculum on plants. Therefore, the second collaboration discussion and activities resulted in a quest to do some planting in the community for the community, which the students completed on their fifth visit. Throughout this process, it became evident that further research around this topic with elementary students is essential.

**Rationale for the Project**

This project was an important topic to explore as, “research into cross-cultural contact and intercultural literacy learning in international schools has been scant. No studies have explored the question of how primary/elementary aged children learn intercultural literacy in the context of the international school” (Heyward, 2004, p. 18). As well, there is little research about implementing collaborative projects involving primary/elementary students from international schools and students from a host country. Therefore, I believed that developing an understanding of and appreciation for the host community while implementing PBL could be a strong instructional and experiential approach that could engage students in an education of caring and international
mindedness. I agree with Noddings (2005) who states that “all students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world and ideas” (p. 173).

Although my goal was to promote active citizenship and social responsibility through a project, I had to be careful that my students and I did not do all the planning of the projects. Many of these students and I are expatriates, and regardless of our good intentions, the local community could still perceive us as intrusive. My understanding of SL, which is greatly influenced by Freire, led me to believe that community action, such as an environmental project, is best initiated through the vision of people in the local community in collaboration with expatriates, if the community wishes. This would involve intercultural literacy and active citizenship through SL.

As I explored different service-learning models, I began to search for the best way to incorporate the components I wanted for my project. Many of the models did not address the components of critical reflection and relationship development with people in the community. I wanted to find a model that also focused on partnerships with the people who are local, that incorporated critical and interactive reflection with all people involved, and that demonstrated inclusion of the all the participant voices, including my own, in the data. Because the term, service learning, is so broad, however, it lends itself to multiple interpretations and multiple models. As well, the term has become controversial, and often evokes a negative response from many people who see it as charity rather than justice.

Due to the potential negativity, I felt it was necessary to have a clearly defined service-learning model before implementation. For this school and setting, I needed a
model that incorporated student-led, experiential projects with a service theme into the curriculum, while working alongside partners in the local community. The integral point is that the members of the host community can best identify the needs of the community, and the process has to be one of mutual empowerment and collaboration. What might the students learn? Besides developing new relationships and collaborating on an environmental project, students were allotted significant time for reflection on and discussion of the causes of environmental issues and how the actions of humans can hurt or help the environment. Similar to Friere, (2009) I believed that the reflection and discussion would lead to an understanding that “human beings are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it” (p. 109). In addition to learning about environmental issues, my students would also be learning about the host community and other cultures. As Berry (1990) suggests,

by placing students in an international/intercultural setting in a service situation, and by asking them to study and reflect upon that culture and its values in relation to their own, students gain a new and more sophisticated perspective on human and international issues. (p. 324)

However, the type of service situation students are placed in can vary greatly among international schools. As well, there has been little research on or evidence of the benefits of SL within an international school setting, and these settings are quite unique. More research is required to support this approach in an international school considering its distinctive setting and students. Moreover, there is even less research, if any, on teachers’ actions, beliefs and assumptions when implementing service projects in
international schools. Because teachers are the primary players in these projects, I believe it is important for teachers to question what they do and why. It was important for me to do this and to situate myself in the research; therefore, I chose a combination of autoethnography and self-study as my research methodology.

**Research Methodology-Autoethnographic Self Study**

My position as an expatriate teaching in an international school, my surroundings in a foreign country and my daily experiences have a profound effect on me personally and on this project. I therefore chose autoethnography as the research methodology to reflect on my experiences during the project and how I made sense of them.

“Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Autoethnography, however, is not just telling stories about one’s experience in the classroom, highlighting positive pedagogical discoveries and interrogating taken-for-granted practices. Autoethnography as a research method is both a process and a product that shares similarities with autobiographical work and ethnography, but it is also decidedly different in process. Ellis, et. al, (2011) explain that autoethnographers not only use research literature and methodological tools to analyze experiences, they must also use their personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, so they can make characteristics of culture familiar to insiders and outsiders.

Although the product of autoethnography shares similarities with autobiography and ethnography, it is different in that the autoethnographer endeavours to produce a text that is aesthetic and evocative [with] thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience. Through the use of field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, autoethnographers
first discern patterns of cultural experience then describe these patterns using facets of storytelling (e.g., character and plot development), through showing and telling, and alternating authorial voice (Ellis et. al, 2011).

I could see how an autoethnographic self-study might facilitate how I situated myself in this project and how I perceived my actions in an educational context. I hoped to make my personal and cultural experiences meaningful and engaging, through a blend of the personal and relational nature of the research process and by creating easily accessible texts (Ellis et. al, 2011). Throughout the process I was seeking pedagogical improvement in an educational setting that was based in a foreign country, and I was personally hoping to “provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20), what I believed.

**Theoretical Perspective**

My notion of service to a community is highly influenced by Freire who takes a critical look at SL and issues of power, which I discuss in the next chapter. I therefore chose critical theory as the lens for analyzing this project. “Critical Social Science says that our observations and experiences with empirical reality are not pure, neutral, and unmediated; rather ideas, beliefs, and interpretations color or influence what and how we observe” (Neuman, 2011, p. 110). I draw upon critical theory because it requires a reflective assessment of what is being studied, as well as the experience itself. Neuman (2011) notes that researchers drawing upon critical theory “conduct studies to critique and transform social relations by revealing the underlying sources of social control, power relations, and inequality” (p. 109). By revealing these sources and reflecting upon them, researchers raise questions about taken-for-granted-practices and beliefs, which
then may lead to possible change or transformation. I wanted to use critical theory to question the way SL is typically conducted in schools, and to question my own practice in the hopes of bringing about change.

This study aimed to engage young students in a SL model that had a partnership with the community. This approach is different from the way many teachers and administration in International Schools currently implement SL. Currently, in many international schools, including my own, fundraising or community service is called SL and does not involve collaboration, partnerships with the host community, or reflection. This fundraising, giving-receiving type of model “often leaves students’ [and educators’] assumptions regarding privilege and equity unexamined” (King, 2004). Again drawing upon the work of Freire, there are implications of power and oppressiveness that may occur as a result of this. It is therefore necessary to take a critical approach in order to pursue an understanding of the lived experience, interactions, and relationships of those involved, while at the same time providing discussion and reflection points illuminated by an autoethnographic text.

Since critical theory attempts to fuse theory and action and autoethnography is both process and product, they are compatible. Both critical theory and autoethnography complement each other through the living and experiencing of the research within a real context and culture, while looking to bring about change through authentic dialogue and reflection. As Ellis et al. (2011, p. 2) state,

Autoethnographers view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better.
Limitations to Study

One limitation of the study is that much of the background research used for the literature review is data collected for high school and post-secondary students. A second limitation is that the data collection and documentation for this study is in English. Because many students in the classroom we visited did not have English as a first language, and most of the people in the community spoke only French and Arabic, two translators were used. This sometimes acted as a barrier, as true meanings or the beauty of responses in the original language may have been lost. It was also difficult to ask follow-up questions during interviews, which, with the translator, sometimes became confusing and somewhat fragmented. Despite several challenges associated with this project, I gained some meaningful insights into my own practice that may be helpful for others teaching in overseas international schools.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This study encompassed several interrelated educational components that influenced the study. These components included the students, the faculty, the international school curriculum, intercultural literacy, experiential learning that is the basis for PBL and SL, and the research methodology. This chapter reviews some of the literature related to each of these components.

The Students

The students in this study attend an international school and like students in most international schools, they form a unique cohort that is characterized by the variety of their backgrounds and experiences (Gillies, 1998; Hayden, 2006). “Not only does the population of international schools vary in terms of culture, national and linguistic backgrounds and previous educational experience, there is also considerable variation in the reasons for students attending an international school in the first place” (Hayden, 2006, p. 39). Regardless of the interchangeable terms, *global nomads* or *third culture kids*, Heyward (2002, p. 25) notes that these students identify themselves “not primarily with their ‘home’ culture-since they may have never lived there-nor with the ‘host’ culture, but rather with a newly evolving global transculture and international diaspora of globally mobile expatriates”.

Due to their global mobility, researchers have found that these global nomads tend to possess on average, certain unique characteristics that are different from students in the continental U.S. (Gillies, 2001). For example, they tend to be more tolerant of cultural and religious differences (Orr and Beach, 1985 cited in Gillies, 2001; Rucci,
1993). Other characteristics of global nomads offered by Pascoe (2006) are summarized in the following profile:

- Alert, intelligent, and geographically aware
- Mature, sensitive, and skilled at listening
- Likely to exhibit tolerance and cross-cultural understanding
- Flexible and open to change
- High achieving
- Drawn to careers associated with service to the community or world
- The overseas experience makes them feel different
- They gravitate to others like themselves
- Children are silent partners in relocation
- Issues of adolescence and rebellion are delayed
- A migratory instinct can take hold
- Global nomads feel rootless and restless, as if they don’t belong anywhere
- Global nomads have issues of unresolved grief

These unique characteristics may help the global nomads successfully communicate with the host community (Heyward, 2002; McCaig; 1994; Pascoe, 2006). McCaig (cited in Pollock and Van Reken, 1999, p. 91) states, “In an era when global vision is imperative, when skills in intercultural communication, linguistic ability, mediation, diplomacy, and the management of diversity are critical, global nomads are better equipped in these areas by the age of eighteen than are many adults”.

Because the students attending international schools, including the students who participated in this study, generally possess these somewhat unique characteristics such
as the ability to speak multiple languages, and because the schools are located in a variety of countries, teachers have the opportunity to enhance the students’ learning through service to a host community (Allen, 2000; Berry, 1990; Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). Therefore, my students seemed well suited for a collaborative project with the host community, venturing out from behind the high walls of the private school and the expatriate shell. I believe, as does Allen (2000) that “if we are to utilize the possibilities of real cross-cultural fertilization, international schools need to look outside their walls” (p. 133) and into the community for authentic learning opportunities.

Service to a community can be mutually beneficial to the students and the hosts, as long as the program has a component of critical reflection to help the students see their role as collaborators with the community rather than saviours of it (Berry, 1990; King, 2004). A strong emphasis on student reflection might assist them in becoming global citizens which means “...preparing them to be stewards of their world, to develop the skills, knowledge, and values to make our world a worthwhile and livable place for everyone, regardless of one’s ethnicity, gender, age, size, sexual orientation, religion, social class, or physical ability” (Wade, 2007, p. xiii). Berry (1990) cautions however, that

a service-learning program should intentionally and systematically confront the fact that students’ values may be different from those of the communities where they are placed. To pretend that these differences do not exist is to miss the core educational potential in intercultural experience. (p. 313)
Thus, teachers who incorporate a service component into their programs for students in international schools will see that this is a step towards an understanding of global citizenship that goes beyond fun, flags, food, and field trips.

**The Faculty**

I have situated myself in the research and am part of the faculty who teach in international schools; therefore, it is necessary for me to examine some of the characteristics of the faculty. Educators who teach in international schools, as well as on my faculty, share many similar characteristics to the families and students with whom they work such as extensive travel, acquisition of new languages, and a transient lifestyle. Many teachers teach overseas for different reasons, so it is difficult to describe a general portrait of these educators because, “as always when discussing international schools, it is impossible to generalize” (Hayden, 2006, p. 75). For recruiting purposes, Hardman (2001) created categories of overseas teachers that included: Childless career professionals, and Senior career professionals, Mavericks (free and independent spirits), Career professionals with family, Senior teachers and Senior Penelopes (a term meaning someone who has become faithful to the country to which they have lived for some time as an expatriate).¹ Regardless of the reasons for teaching overseas or the characteristics of people who do, the “diversity of teachers’ nationalities, backgrounds, and experiences contributes significantly to the successful evolution of international education” (Hardman, 2001, p. 129). Perhaps this is because those of us who teach in international schools experience an excitement and anticipation that comes when embarking on a new adventure in a foreign country where we encounter multiple learning experiences daily.

---

¹ It was interesting for me to see how the faculty at my school, including myself, fit these categories very well.
within a new community. Teachers have the opportunity to incorporate some of the same learning experiences into school activities for students living abroad and connect these experiences to the curriculum.

The International School Curriculum

Due to the multitude of varying components related to the term international school, it is not surprising then, that it is difficult to define the curriculum. My present employer follows a standards-based curriculum that is based on the International Baccalaureate (IB), American Education Reaches Out (AERO), as well as other United States curricular standards with the primary instruction in English.

While many international schools are accredited and follow a standards-based curriculum, there is not a formal document mandated by a specific state. “The inevitable lack of clarity about the definitions of ‘curriculum’, ‘international school’ and ‘international education’ helps to explain why the creation of an international curriculum has to be a work in progress” (Skelton, 2002, p. 41). Fortunately, in most international schools, including mine, this lack of clarity allows teachers some pedagogical and curricular freedom and opportunities, which can be based on the administration’s vision, the school’s mission statement and its core values. For example, the mission statement (2009) at Lincoln School in Kathmandu, Nepal states:

Lincoln School is a multicultural community in the foothills of the Himalaya that inspires in each student a passion for learning, the confidence and competence to pursue their dreams, and the commitment to serve as a compassionate global citizen and leader, who is a steward of the environment.
This type of mission statement lends itself nicely to allow for the possibility of service-learning projects and experiences that are challenging and inclusive. This study, however, took place at a school in Tunisia where the mission statement, *Opening doors, hearts and minds* is not as specific as Nepal, but still broad enough to support a service-learning opportunity.

Furthermore, my school is accredited by The Council of International Schools (CIS) which recognizes the importance the host culture plays in the education of students in international schools. For example, one standard in the CIS accreditation manual states, “Students shall benefit from a curriculum and related activities that shall be enhanced by the cultural diversity of both the host country and the school community, hence contributing to the development of global citizenship in students” (2013, p.1). My current employer recently went through the process of the CIS accreditation renewal, and the accreditation report recommended the school strengthen this standard and further provide for more activities and opportunities for students to become involved with the community of the host country. This recommendation speaks to Allen’s (2000) observation that, “in many schools (especially those with a low percentage of host nationals), the student body can easily become focused on the life of the expatriate community” (p. 133). Although an accreditation council may deem interaction with the host community important, implementation could be an obstacle as, “research suggests that links with the local community have not been seen as important for either international school students or teachers” (Allen, 2000, p. 133). More recently with globalization and frequent mobility, there seems to be a renewed interest in intercultural literacy and supporting intercultural awareness with students who attend international
schools (Gillies, 2001). In my current school, where this study took place, there is ongoing discussion and revision of curriculum. The current curriculum director of my school expressed an interest in ideas about interacting with the host culture, as well as exploring a newly-coined term, intercultural literacy (Heyward, 2002).

**Intercultural Literacy**

In addition to engaging in SL, students were provided with many opportunities to interact with the outside community in an attempt to assist in the development of “intercultural literacy” (Heyward, 2002). As stated in Chapter One, Heyward defines intercultural literacy as the, “understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for cross-cultural engagement” (2002, p. 10). This is a fairly new term and there is not yet much research about intercultural literacy, though a very laudable concept. Heyward developed a model for the development of intercultural literacy that follows a continuum. Based on specific criteria within these components, students can be placed on the grid ranging from unconsciously incompetent to unconsciously competent. For example, in the heading of cultural participation, a student could possibly range from unconsciously incompetent (if they do not participate, or are unaware of cultural dimension of contact) to unconsciously competent (they would have well-established cross-cultural friendships and/or working relationships). My students who participated in this study started at varying levels on this continuum, and by being immersed in this project, progressed in their literacy, because of the relationships formed. Therefore, developing intercultural literacy between the school and host community could be the key to forming quality relationships. As Heyward (2002) suggests, “…the path to intercultural literacy is likely to lie not primarily in the
international world of the expatriate community, but in the traditional, deeply rooted cultures outside of the expatriate compound” (p. 27). The challenge is to find ways to bring the expatriate and host communities together using a variety of teaching approaches.

**Experiential Learning, Project Based Learning and Service Learning**

The general instructional method used in the study included experiential learning or inquiry-based learning, which is the basis for Project Based Learning and Service Learning. All have roots in the educational movement of Progressivism in the early 20th century and the work of John Dewey (1933; 1938) who posited that education should be based on real-life experiences where students are interacting with others (Rocheleau, 2004). By engaging in concrete experiences and solving real-life problems, students develop skills and understanding at a much deeper level in a variety of curricula areas (Thomas, 2000). Kolb’s “Experiential Learning Cycle” (1984, cited in Kolb & Kolb,) illustrates the process where students undergo cycles of engaging in concrete experiences, reflecting on the experiences, formulating new ideas, and putting the ideas into action. This process can include cooperative learning relationships and mutual partnerships within the cycle (see Figure 1).
In addition to experiential learning, PBL and SL are the instructional approaches utilized in this project. There are many similarities between PBL and SL. Both are student-centered, realistic, investigative, and promote inquiry. They are both connected to the school curriculum, and are experiential because they are open ended and student initiated. Willis (2007) notes that, “instruction that includes open-ended and student-initiated questioning offers a balance of emotional and intellectual opportunities and, therefore, helps students engage their motivation and higher-order executive functions” (p.36). An explanation of the differences between PBL and SL follows.

**Project Based Learning.** PBL has students actively involved in learning through a project. The Project Based Learning website ([http://pbl-online.org](http://pbl-online.org)) defines Project Based Learning as:

A systematic teaching method that engages students in learning essential knowledge and life-enhancing skills through an extended, student-influenced inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks.
Typically the teacher and students develop an “essential” or “driving” question that guides the inquiry, and that is based on the standards of the curriculum. They then devise a plan for implementing the process by working backwards from the end goal they want to achieve (Buck Institute for Education, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Unlike SL, the projects typically do not have a service element. Railsback (2002, p. 18) provides some examples of possible projects:

- Design a living history museum or recreate an historical event
- Develop a newsletter or website on a specific issue relevant to the school or community
- Conduct a survey of historical buildings
- Create a book on tape for a senior centre or an elementary school class
- Create a wildlife or botanical guide for a local wildlife area
- Compile oral histories of the local area by interviewing community elders

SL, however, has the goal of improving conditions for a group or community. Because this project was going to be in service to the community, SL became the instructional method of choice.

**Service Learning.** SL is very closely related philosophically, pedagogically and procedurally to PBL. Like PBL, it too can be traced back “to progressive education and its most influential, original, and systematic theorist, John Dewey” (Rocheleau, 2004, p. 4) and is often tied to curricular standards. The difference between it and PBL as Casey, Springer, Billig & Davidson (2005) point out, is that SL is “a means to empower students and educational institutions to become more aware of the needs of the communities of which they are part and to become engaged and civically active in mutually beneficial
ways” (p. xi). Similarly, the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-learning (CACSL) states that the vision of Community Service-learning (CSL) is to have “students, educators and communities learning and working together to strengthen individuals and society”. Some contend that implementing SL within the curriculum changes education profoundly (Case, Falk, Smith, & Werner, 2004; Pinzón & Barriga, 2005). Numerous studies have illustrated how students grow in empathy and respect for groups with whom they had little in common until they participated in a service or student action project. Furthermore, students develop skills and knowledge through experiential education and reflecting on their experiences (Isaacson & Sapperstein, 2005; Kraft & Wheeler, 2003; Poplau, 2004; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007).

Despite all the research describing the benefits of SL, it is a contested topic or term, with many differing opinions regarding this approach. Some suggest that rather than promoting social justice, it can further entrench hierarchical power relationships that have the potential for negative effects on the participants (King, 2004). An awareness of the potential negative effects of SL can be traced to another influential theorist—Paulo Friere.

Besides Dewey, Friere influenced the literature on SL by emphasizing community participation and experientialism as well as the value of relationships and dialogue with everyone involved to avoid oppression of any person. As Freire states,

Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked with false generosity of paternalism) and makes the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. (Friere, 2009, p. 36).
The role of teacher and student within a service-learning model should therefore be one of cooperation and equal involvement, and this was how I envisioned my role throughout this project. I believe the teacher is not the holder and provider of the knowledge, but that “knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with other” (Friere, 2009, p. 58). If all currently implemented service-learning models had a theoretical foundation influenced by Friere, perhaps there would be fewer critics. Thus, it was my intent throughout this study to follow the Freirean model and incorporate components that were aligned with this theoretical foundation.

**SL Models and Components**

Some models in the past have labeled themselves as SL, when they are actually community service, fundraising, or charity. The community service that often exists in schools includes volunteer programs, community service projects for extra credit or offered as a class, an activity to raise money, or an after school activity such as environmental clubs. This study followed components of service-learning models that were not meant to be about fundraising or about students making community observations and judgments. Rather, I chose models that would generate ideas on how to participate in environmental activism and be responsible citizens while collaborating with local students in the same community. I attempted to tie the project to curricular standards, involve students from both schools, and provide adequate time and opportunities for self-reflection. Similar to my vision, most of the models of SL expressed in the literature consisted of many of these components and advocated working
together to achieve a goal, rather than donating money or personal time in an isolated event.

One model that influenced this project was provided by The National Youth Leadership Council (NYCL) (n.d.) and highlights eight key principles for effective SL. These include: curriculum integration, reflection, youth voice, diversity, meaningful service, process monitoring, duration, and reciprocal partnerships. Maybach’s (1996) model, provided another influence. It is an extension of the above criteria emphasizing the importance of a social justice perspective with SL. Maybach contends that individuals “who serve with good intentions, however, without exploring the consequent effects of the service on the service recipient, are perpetuating an oppressive situation in society whether they are cognizant of the oppression or not” (Maybach, 1996, p. 226). Therefore, she suggests a paradigm shift from a traditional to a more current SL model that includes: the relationship, goals, outcomes, research, accomplishments, reflection focus of service and design, definition of terms, evaluation of results, and follow up. These elements were also utilized throughout this study, where I attempted to shift from being a service provider to that of an interactive partner that encourages problem solving, meaningful experiences, and reflection; where experiences and interactions form because of a partnership as opposed to hierarchy (Hinck & Brandell, 1999, Maybach 1996).

Maybach’s model was informed by Freire’s work, thus both informing mine.

Incorporating the components of the models, however, is not enough. Assessment also plays a key role in successful SL implementation because there is still considerable skepticism “over service learning’s educational merit . . . despite published research reviews showing a consistent set of positive outcomes for students” (Furco & Root, 2010,
Assessment is one component that is often of high interest among school administration and parents. As with most projects and assignments, most of the people involved want to know how the assignments translate into a report card grade, whereas “teachers felt that the real key to successful assessment of service-learning was classroom-based dialogue and discussion” (Koliba, Campbell, & Shapiro, 2006, p.705). In addition, teachers believed that other forms of assessment such as written reflections, learning journals, written proposals, and specific assessment linked to the standard or objective should also be included. However, as Noddings states, “In the caring segment, we should move away from the question, ‘Has Johnny learned X?’ to the far more pertinent question, ‘What has Johnny learned?’” (2005, p. 179). Some learning, such as the value of partnerships and friendships cannot be translated into a report card mark.

With a project such as this, the key element is about building relationships, and as the literature review highlighted, current models and the cultural context require further examination and exploration. To facilitate a further examination of the topic and understand my role as teacher, as well as my biases and assumptions within a service-learning context, I used an autoethnographic self-study to describe and analyze my personal experience in order to understand my cultural experience and teaching practices (Ellis et al., 2011). Elements of self-study and autoethnography are further explored in the following chapter.
Chapter Three-Research Paradigm and Design

Theoretical Framework (paradigm): Transformative/Critical

A transformative/critical theoretical framework served as the lens for designing the research project, collecting the data, and analyzing it. Similar to others who work for transformation through education, I believed that the inquiry “needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda” (Creswell, 2003, p. 9). I also thought that an “action agenda may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live and the researcher’s life” (Creswell, 2003, p. 9-10).

It is widely accepted that when engaging in research of any kind, it is nearly impossible for the researcher to entirely free herself from biases, beliefs, and ideas, which influence and shape how we observe, experience, and interpret reality (Neuman, 2011, p. 110). The researcher must become aware of her bias and attempt to bracket and/or situate it within the research project. The success of this project revolved around my willingness to unpack and critically examine my personal beliefs and ideas before, during, after, and much later through the research process. There were too many cultural implications that emerged along the way, which needed to be explored and questioned, in order to proceed further.

Throughout the study, the questions that surfaced challenged my perspectives about certain models of SL and viewpoints used today in many international schools. When engaged with this kind of research while being both the researcher and one of the participants, it is challenging to attend to shedding light on the “underlying sources of social control power relations, and inequality” (Neuman, 2011, p. 109) in the hopes of
transforming social relations in the site. If North American organizations overseas and their teachers are to authentically engage with forming relationships with host communities, they will need to be continuously reflective and cognizant about possible oppressive practices they may use, regardless of the challenges (King, 2004; Maybach, 1996; Crabtree, 2008).

This kind of work, including this research project, has an inherent activist orientation which then “requires the researcher to commit to a value position” (Neuman, 2011, p. 114). Because the participants, including myself, are expatriates, it is usually inappropriate to pass moral and political judgment on the activities and ways of a host country. In a collaborative approach with local people, an activist approach is more likely to be successful in building authentic relationships and is considered decidedly less offensive (King, 2004; Neuman, 2011; Maybach 1996).

With so many variables intertwined in this study, its complexity invites further and more formal teacher exploration and reflection in order to ensure it is a valuable pedagogical approach, as judged by all participants. Teachers conducting similar studies of elementary students over a sustained period of time in many different locations may provide valuable information to international school educators (Neuman, 2006).

**Research Method: Qualitative Research**

I chose to conduct a qualitative research study because as Neuman (2011) states, “in qualitative research, we usually emphasize the social context because the meaning of a social action, event, or statement greatly depends on the context in which it appears” (p.175). All actions, events and statements that permeated throughout this study were directly and indirectly influenced by the social context. There are many types of
qualitative research such as various forms of narrative research and ethnography, as highlighted in this study. The main strength of qualitative research is a setting of lived experiences and interactions. Critics of qualitative research, however, contend that, “qualitative researchers write fiction, not science, and that these researchers have no way of verifying their truth statements” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.8). Denzin and Lincoln do not agree with this statement, but they do argue for maintaining consistency between the conceptual and methodological orientations of the inquiry, while conducting research that is deemed trustworthy, credible, dependable and confirmable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). Criteria for judging the veracity of qualitative research will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Narrative Research**

Narrative research is about stories, and all research under this umbrella is written in some narrative form. The data and theories are manifested through stories and the investigation of these stories. Narrative serves as a strong form of research because it acknowledges that, “evidence, such as personal descriptions of life experiences, can serve to issue knowledge about neglected but significant areas of the human realm” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 472). Narrative Inquiry is one approach within narrative research that is a way of understanding experience. “It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). This study embraced a significant number of collaborative relationships and experiences. It involved not only the researcher and participant relationship, but also teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and student-student collaboration, within the context of an overarching relationship that intertwined culture,
community, and personal struggles. Due to the complexities involved in this study, narrative research was an optimal methodology. The shifts and changes throughout this study exposed many stories conducive to narrative inquiry because “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

**Autoethnography and Self Study**

One form of narrative research is the autoethnography. “When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p. 4). An autoethnographic study was the strongest research method for a complex setting where the myriad of relationships created the cultural experiences that formed the story. Ellis et. al (2011) make the distinction between a narrative inquiry and autoethnography suggesting that while narrative inquiry embraces the story in a fluid setting, “autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (p.1).

As this study began to unfold, it revealed a connection between autoethnography and self-study research in its design. First, it had a strong personal focus within a cultural context, which is autoethnographic. However, with the underlying themes and discoveries that arose throughout the study that are aimed to incite discussion about the improvement in educational practice, it is also informed by self-study research.

Self-study research or teacher research is a form of research that is reflexive in nature, intended to help a practitioner examine her or his own practice. Samaras & Freese, (2006, p. 41) provide an explanation of its relevance:
Self study provides relevance and utility to practitioners particularly because the inquiry is contextually bound. Research is grounded in the living issues of practice and it incorporates the persons in their context or setting. It is primarily qualitative in nature and can take many forms, including action research, autoethnography, autobiography or other forms of narrative inquiry. Loughran (2007) drawing upon the work of Pinnegar (1998) reminds us that “self-study is a methodology for studying professional practice and there is no one way, or correct way, of doing self-study. Rather, how a self-study might be ‘done’ depends on what is sought to be better understood” (p.15).

Due to the setting and content of this study, I felt using an autoethnographic approach through self-study would be the most appropriate research method. Moreover, it was congruent with situating myself in the research in order to continually shed light upon my biases; my taken-for-granted assumptions, culturally and pedagogically. While reflection may assist with cultural and pedagogical critique and understanding in the moment, the true depth of understanding a culture and one’s practice, is an ongoing, life long process.

**Participants**

In this study, the participants included 17 second graders from the international school (who identify themselves with 16 different nationalities), 25 Tunisian second grade students, and local Tunisian teachers (the classroom teacher and the English teacher), and administrators (the principal of the local school and their school manager). The initial step to begin the collaboration process began with a visit to the local school that included me, my translator/liaison, the director and the principal to discuss my vision.
for the partnership and to determine whether our goals and visions were aligned. After the director agreed, we set a time and date where I finally met with the classroom teacher, the English teacher, and the students. In the end, my students assembled together with the local Tunisian students and worked together on five separate occasions in multiple locations.

**Research Methodology**

**Data Collection.** As the project and study unfolded, I documented and reflected on my experiences inside and outside of the classroom following recommendations suggested by various qualitative researchers (Bullough, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis et. al, 2011). Data collection for this study included field notes, excerpts from a personal learning journal and reflections, as well as interviews, conversations, and student written and verbal reflections and discussions. I interviewed three colleagues who had experiences with SL or experience with projects and the host culture. I also interviewed the administration and the teacher from the local collaborating school at the conclusion of the project.

I followed interview processes suggested by Gall, Gall & Borg (2003) and Creswell, 2008), where I conducted, with the help of an interpreter, both “informal conversational interviews” and semi-structured interviews using the “general interview guide approach”. The informal conversational interviews took place as part of the interaction between the participants and me, and didn’t involve focusing on specific questions (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003). This provided some flexibility and allowed unexpected data to arise from the conversations. Creswell (2008) suggests, however, that the lack of consistency in interview questions may make it difficult to code the data. I
therefore also used the general interview guide approach where I asked the interviewees some of the same specific questions in order to have some consistency. This style of interviewing provides more focus and ensures that some of the same general information is gathered from each participant (Creswell, 2008).

I did not decide on the students’ projects, but arranged the environment and activities with the co-teacher. I gathered data and information throughout the process hoping to answer my research questions, constantly changing directions, maneuvering and navigating through a foreign and unique cultural environment.

My personal reflection was a key component during and after the conversations and interviews. I was guided by the belief that “when researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being a part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et. al, 2011, p.4). This brought to life interesting aspects in my search for my identity as an educator within the setting of this project.

**Data Analysis.** Data analysis is a journey and “the sense of continually moving back and forth between being in the field, field texts, and research texts is always present as we negotiate the inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.135). I used two different translators to transcribe the interviews conducted in Arabic and French in order to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the responses. I personally transcribed the other interviews, which were in English, to become more connected to the responses. I reread the transcripts and my journal, and I looked for patterns or themes that were mentioned or noted by my colleagues or myself. I continually reflected on discussions with all of the participants, as well as visited the partner school to discuss any insights or discussions
that the teacher encountered with her students. Parts of conversations, discussions, and excerpts from interviews were used, with an initial used as a pseudonym for the participants. Final themes and connections from all of the data emerged and these components created a story that has only just begun.

Much of the writing of the narrative was trying to find a balance between being honest and too honest to the point of over sharing. Like Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 749) I too found “it’s an existential struggle for honesty and expansion in an uncertain world”. Coupled with autoethnographic writing is the self-study notion of reflective practice and attending to the pedagogical and relational. All the while, as a research-practitioner, I needed to be cognizant that “careful scrutiny of what is being done, how and why, becomes all the more important if the outcomes are to genuinely affect understandings of practice beyond the individual self” (Loughran, 2007, p.12).

**Validity**

One strength of qualitative research is the researcher’s professional freedom to express findings about relationships within rich contexts without having to reduce human experiences to a numeric formula. However, it then is the object of debate when critics suggest there is not enough actual scientific data, but more of an interpretation of the data. The validity question is addressed by realizing that “validity is not inherent in a claim but is a characteristic given to a claim by the ones to whom the claim is addressed” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p.474). Therefore, in narrative research, the key to validity comes from the reader as, “it is the readers who make the judgment about plausibility of a knowledge claim based on the evidence and argument for the claim reported by the researcher” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 484). Specifically speaking about autoethnographies,
“validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. A feeling that what is represented could be true” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 10).

Laurel Richardson (2000) provides other criteria by which to judge the validity and reliability of autoethnographies. She suggests:

(a) Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? (b) Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? (c) Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? (d) Impactfullness. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action? (e) Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Autoethnographic manuscripts might include dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and strong metaphors to invite the reader to ‘relive’ events with the author (Cited in Holt, 2003, p. 12).

**Ethical Considerations**

As with many studies involving a community and culture that is not the researcher’s own, there must be an awareness of judgment and personal biases, and a strong understanding of these biases. While the SL model I implemented attempted to reinforce the sensitive nature of life and politics within the local community, I understood that there are ethical concerns that are raised when a foreigner conducts research in a community, then, essentially leaves. “Sadly, qualitative research in many if not all its forms (observation, participation, interviewing, ethnography), serves as a metaphor for
colonial knowledge, for power and for truth” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.1). I have attempted to be more ethical by including the voices of those involved and by maintaining a relationship with my colleagues after the study ended. However, “we can never definitely know how others interpret our work nor can we ever definitely know who we harm and help others with our life stories” (Adams, 2008, p. 188).
Chapter Four - The Project

In this chapter, I discuss the story of the project which includes excerpts from interviews and reflections that are used to highlight important background information, thus providing more depth into the setting and the study. The excerpts are italicized and a first initial denotes the source.

The Planning Phase

As previously mentioned, Tunisia’s revolution was the first obstacle in the beginning stages of this project. I would never have survived the stress of trying to find a collaborating school without the help of a Tunisian colleague and friend, who has a great amount of knowledge, experience and connections to the outside community. While the government was in flux, there was no one available to grant us permission to interact with a local public school. *D remained calm, having been through her share of trying to implement projects but facing governmental obstacles because of a very strict dictator and his powerful wife who was in competition with our school, as she was trying to open her own private school. In order to overcome governmental obstacles, *D felt it was best to contact a private school nearby because she knew the director, and we would not need any government paperwork. I remember thinking it was a lot of pain and effort just to get into the community. Already the many different obstacles made me think this project was bigger than I had anticipated. Really, was it going to be worth the stress? Being in this country was posing a few challenges I had not experienced in Canada or Nepal, demanding further risk taking and effort as an educator.

The First Visit

*D and I went to the school together and unfortunately, all arrangements were
made by the director, and all communication was with him. I was not invited to meet with the teacher who was to be my co-teacher in this project, nor the students. I felt frustrated when I got home that evening because while *D translated the principle idea and topic, I was terrified that the teacher and students were expecting us to fundraise for them, and donate items, similar to many models used by international organizations. I could not understand the discussion between the director and *D, and was up all night worrying that we were not on the same page as far as what this partnership was about, especially when I was supposed to be in partnership with another teacher, whom I had never met. I had to create the activities alone, completely insecure and worried that the lack of contact and communication would make the first visit a failure, which can sometimes be the end of such a partnership. Another colleague who also tried to set up a partnership outside the school did experience failure. Upon her arrival at the school, nobody was expecting her, and that set the stage for her unsuccessful partnership.

What also kept me up the entire night before our visit, was that I had one meeting in an office, barely courageous enough to have a discussion, and I was not able to visit classes, or observe the climate of the school. I had no idea what I was walking into. My Tunisian friend, who was educated in Tunisia, and who now works at my school, always comments on the differences between our instructional approaches and classroom management:

_In many local schools, the students are arranged so that the high achieving kids always get to sit at the front, and the low kids always sit in the back._

A colleague had an experience I feared greatly—some problems managing the students:

_They have two shifts that go at that school, so there was one shift leaving as the other kids had just gone in to start school and they were mostly middle school, high school kids and they, you know, a lot of them were yelling at the school bus_
and a few of them giving the finger and, you know, our kids were all looking out the window and, “oh my gosh, he’s giving us the finger” and then a man came running out to control the middle school, and high school kids and he had a stick and he was hitting all of them and it was a big commotion on our bus, and, you know, we’re trying to downplay this whole scene and that was how we first went into the school.

I was walking into the unknown with my students, and I was taking a risk that was completely out of my comfort zone, especially after talking to others who had negative experiences. I knew, however, I had to trust at some point. I had hoped that it would not be the end after only one visit with the students. I was not sure how I would handle witnessing corporal punishment, or even if that existed at this school, and I really was too nervous about offending anyone to ask. I thought back to the first field trip I ever took with my students in Nepal when an extremist group, the Maoists, had barricaded all entrances back into the city and I was abandoned with a classroom of kids in the middle of nowhere without an abundance of water and food, fantasizing about an easy field trip back in Canada to the Science Centre. I thought, surely, I can embrace the unpredictability of this excursion only 10 blocks away.

As we entered their school on that first visit, my students were freakishly quiet. I had never seen them like this before. I had debriefed them about the project, but this visit was about getting acquainted, and making new friends. I did not even want to begin the environmental collaboration activities yet. The students entered the class and partnered up randomly to interview one another, and play a few math games. It was a helpful surprise that the host school’s English teacher was there to assist them, as well as to discuss and translate. All of the students were shy at first, and space was definitely limited. The most difficult aspect for me was the balancing act. I was trying to get to know the teacher whom I had finally met, provide instructions for the activities,
encourage my students to interact, all while trying to be in the role of researcher, taking pictures and writing notes. It was completely overwhelming and exhausting and I don’t feel I did well at any of the roles. My students, however, were energized and thrilled. Their reflections produced comments such as:

\[ I \text{ like that I can have more friends. } \]
\[ I \text{ is fun to communicate. } \]
\[ I \text{ was worried about how they do things. } \]
\[ I \text{ is important to me to have new friends because you learn new things. } \]

As I re-read my reflection about that first visit, the voice behind the chaos and fatigue was a happy one, but my mind would not shut off. There were so many things I thought I could have done better, as a co-participant. I felt comfortable with the teacher, although I still did not have her contact information, the students were happy, and there had been no situations that caused any alarm or concerns for me or my students, or from our partners’ point of view. I made sure *D did a follow up phone call to be sure we would be welcome for a second get together.

**The Second Visit**

I did not have the teacher’s contact information, so I had to physically go to the school because my French is only intermediate, and speaking on the phone poses great difficulty for me. Face-to-face interaction has always been more successful. I didn’t want to misunderstand anything. I attempted a few visits, but the Director was not there. Finally, after a third time, the teacher and I had a brief interaction and agreed on another date and time for the students to visit our school. Due to Embassy policy and insurance regulations, I was not allowed to send our school buses to pick them up. They relied on
parent volunteer drivers. Our security also requires the names and information about all guests at the school. The day before their visit, I had not received their list and knew it could be a problem, as our rules are strict and the visitors would not be let in. That night, the worrying started again—I thought, *What if the fax doesn’t arrive and security refuses to let them in? What if the students are ashamed of their school, once they see ours? What if the teacher doesn’t like the activity I have planned?* Fortunately, the fax came and our visitors arrived without incident.

The students were genuinely excited and happy to see each other and they struggled through the activity of a discussion of the environmental problems in the community in Tunis. They brainstormed projects they could do together to help. Of course, my class had already done some preliminary work on this and the students were given the instructions prior to the visit. It was their teacher’s role, and my students’ role to communicate and work together to complete the activity. Yes, there were great struggles with language, but they were working through it. I had partnered my English as an Additional Language (EAL) students with the strong Arabic and French speakers in my class. All was going well until a new administrator whom I had not yet met, said to me in English,

*Stop the activity. It is too difficult for the students to communicate. Do you have anything else for them to do?*

But I didn’t want to stop. I explained to her the students did not have to write the responses in English. They could write in Arabic, and I would have them translated later. I saw the value in their language struggle, and their perseverance. One child’s comment confirmed my logic.
Ms. S. *It was really cool today because with my group we spoke Arabic, French and a little bit of English.*

I knew how difficult and frustrating that can be, but I wanted it to continue, and so it continued because I was the queen of the project, yet another unflattering moment.

It seemed, however, that the students rushed through the work as quickly as possible so they could spend some time playing together:

*We’re done Ms. S. Can we just go and have free time with our friends on the playground?*

*I just want to play soccer with my friends.*

*You told us to make sure we play and include the other students, but those girls just want to play by themselves.*

It made me think that it’s the same situation as I see almost every day in every school I have worked. Soccer (and other sports and games) can bring people together, but I cannot force kids to like each other or make them play together. As a teacher, I can only encourage and teach that they at least respect one another and aim for inclusion.

**The Third Visit**

After reading and discussing the student responses, the idea of a beach litter clean-up was a common suggestion. Luckily, the local school was two blocks away from a beach. Currently there is no recycling program in Tunisia, and litter is a complaint of many visitors. Swimming in the Mediterranean Sea was not all I dreamed it would be when I kept getting plastic bags stuck to me. As we entered their school, and picked up our partners to walk two blocks to begin, the security guard who assists us on all excursions, refused to let my students walk. He said we had to take our bus, two blocks, while our partners walked. They were not even permitted to go on the bus with us. I fumed:
So much for trying to make these students feel normal and equal. They aren’t allowed to walk two blocks!

So I discussed the issue with the security, and after many phone calls back to the school, he permitted us to walk, but he escorted. I was clearly annoyed, but later after having interviewed *D, I realized I do not always see or hear the big picture and this could jeopardize the safety of my students. She continued to describe recent attacks on foreigners and cautioned me to always be aware and obey all Embassy warnings, as there are groups that exist who believe the “American” way is polluting the minds of Islamic and Arab people. Overall, *D remains proud and hopeful,

*Islam was never for this kind of exclusion but rather for inclusion and for tolerance and respect.*

As 40 students groomed and began cleaning up the beach completely littered with debris, they started to draw a group of curious onlookers and spectators to the beach. The highlight of the day for many of my students was when one student on-looker observed,

*Hey look everyone! Those kids were playing soccer over there and now they started cleaning up garbage too!*

After a formal class discussion for the reflection component, I learned the students thought it was a fun project and they hoped that people would continue to follow their example. I reflected on our class discussion hoping that the lesson on taking responsibility for one’s actions and looking after the environment would last, become internalized and transferred into the students’ daily lives, and not just be an isolated incident, which is in contrast to what an administrator in our school saw happening everyday. She believed that the service element and the development of personal responsibility needs to be a focus within the school first, then we can reach out to the surrounding community.
The Fourth Visit

I finally received my co-teacher’s telephone number and decided it was best to meet together to discuss our next visit and finally collaborate and plan for both of our classes. I was only able to meet at her school in the morning, when she did not have students. This was a huge obstacle for me. I had to have my teaching assistant cover my class, as well as to arrange for a translator to accompany me to be certain the visit was effective. Two failed attempts later, we were finally able to meet. It is very difficult working with a translator for the first time. It interrupts the flow of collaboration and brainstorming of ideas. At the end of the session, we both agreed to continue with the environmental focus, because her students were studying plants, and so the ideas that came forth from the students, both hers and mine, had to do with planting in the community. This part of the planning was different in that the students were not actually together discussing this idea for their next project, but separately, and only the action part would be together. The main reason for this was the language barrier. I could not even do it without a translator! This reaffirmed my decision to continue taking private language lessons.

The Fifth Visit

The second project, the planting, took place once again at our school. My co-teacher felt it was better to meet at our school because there were no space issues, as in her school. My class had wanted to plant flowers somewhere in the community, but my co-teacher thought it best to plant them in pots, and then give the pots to her students who could plant flowers at their homes. I thought it might be nice to have some planting in
the community around the school, but I was not sure of our reputation in our area. As *D said, the community

... feels that we are colonizers in a way.

The Last Visit

When I called the school the last week to come for another visit, I learned that the students were writing exams, and then would be released for summer vacation. I was shocked. I was under the impression that we would have another get together, something celebratory for the students. However, many events and activities happen because of “Inshallah” (If God wills it) and not preparation and planning.

I returned three more times to the school, without students, to have formal interviews with my co-teacher and an administrator once their students had been released after their exams. My collaborators were very positive about the experience overall, and agreed that we would continue the next year. I tried to ask questions that would encapsulate their true feelings and opinions, as well as hear the comments from the students, but I felt they were trying to answer politely, more so than honestly. The language was a barrier, and it was only in the taxi afterwards that the translator started commenting on other points made that were not told to me during the discussion, such as small comments made about the differences in our teaching, and approaches with students. I, therefore, decided to try to return again to ask some follow-up questions and still today, have many more questions and a desire to strengthen our collaboration.

Research Findings

As I looked over the data I had collected, a few themes emerged, primarily from my notes, interviews, and self-reflections. These included: Thinking Critically, Using SL
Models, Understanding Cultural Experiences and Embracing the “Inshallah”, Examining the School, and Challenging Perceptions. In the following paragraphs, I elaborate briefly on the lessons I learned related to each of these themes.

Thinking Critically

Freire reminds us that, “Thinking critically about practice, of today or yesterday, makes possible the improvement of tomorrow’s practice” (1998, p.44). As much as we want our students to reflect on experiences, especially ones such as this, my own reflections were equally important. Through reading my students’ reflections, through discussions and through formal interviews with colleagues, I came to a deeper understanding of myself within this project, both personally and professionally.

I now realize I should not have started anything with the students, until I was working collaboratively and comfortably with the co-teacher first, even if this took multiple visits to the school with a translator to meet with her. I was so focused on the collaboration and partnership of the students that I forgot I was also supposed to be in a partnership, and was reminded of Noddings words that, “caring is a way of being in relation, not a certain set of specific behaviours” (1995, p.17). Now that my co-teacher and I have worked well together, we will continue to participate in projects with our students, hopefully continuing the partnership for as long as possible before the issues of teacher transiency come into play.

At times, did I lose sight of my relationship with the students? Yes, mostly when I was trying to be a collaborator, a participant in their project idea, their teacher, then a researcher trying to make notes, take pictures and listen. Most times I was too involved
in the research, and did not often do a good job balancing all of the roles, especially when the two groups of students were together.

Was I able to engage my students in critical reflection about difference, power and privilege, as we questioned our assumptions and biases about the host community? No. My students were more focused on meeting new friends, playing together and learning to converse in other languages. When I asked my students their concerns about visiting the local school before the initial visit, they asked questions such as,

*Will they like me?*
*Do they like soccer?*
*Do they study the same things we do?*
*How will I ask them questions since I don’t speak Arabic?*

And during:

*I felt shy when I first entered there. After, I wasn’t shy at all. I liked it when they smiled at me because I know that they like me.*

The data consistently showed they were excited to make friends, and insecure that they wouldn’t be liked, a vulnerability many of us share, but do not express so openly.

Throughout their interactions I never once observed negative comments made about the host country, the partner school facility, students, or teachers. However, just because this was not observed, does not necessarily mean it did/does not exist. As King (2004) suggests, it is the critical reflection that is the most important component missing in many service-learning opportunities. The students did reflect, but did not engage in actual critical reflection which extends and challenges thinking by including theorizing and examining assumptions made by self and society about privilege and equity. (King, 2004). Perhaps my students focused more on friendships due more to their age; however, I probably could have/should have/would have engaged them in discussions appropriate
to their age had I not been so focused on meeting curricular standards, making sure everything ran smoothly, and being diligent about following the SL models I had chosen.

**Using SL Models**

Two service-learning models were implemented, as noted in Chapter Two. I followed Carol Maybach’s model, as well as the NYLC service-learning guidelines. These assisted in a successful outline for this first attempt. It is necessary that a model or guideline inform a project from the beginning. Without a clear philosophy, visions of the project may not match, and could become unsuccessful and oppressive. This is especially important with so many international organizations currently focusing on fundraising instead of collaborating, which can lead to a predetermined notion of what is expected within the partnership. As one colleague experienced:

*I think it’s hard to separate that exchange from the perceived when you go to someone else’s school, that expectation of getting something. Like when we got there, we ended up having a lot of teachers approach us from classes we weren’t even going to who were asking, “Oh come in our room, we have a song for you” “We’d really like a whiteboard” “We don’t have any computers”.*

For any teacher’s attempt at SL, I believe these two models would be adequate guides for a smooth implementation of a project, along with the realization of the many other factors that come into play in this unique setting and situation. When self-reflecting on the many twists and turns of the project, Maybach’s model remained the consistent and solid foundation, even when activities did not go as planned. Without this, key components could be missed or forgotten. However, “finding a contact” is a necessary component that is missing in these two models. The first critical factor for implementing the project was my contact person who was familiar with the history and obstacles in the host country. As I was writing this, I realized every decision, every success, and every
improvement plan came directly from, or were greatly influenced by, discussions with my main contact, *D.

She provided history:

Before we had also lots of obstacles of another kind because this school was kind of eyed upon by the government, the lady, the first lady of Tunisia wanted to get it, to buy it, to take its students for her new school, the International School of Carthage so she did everything possible to kind of blow up all the good programs of the school, so that was the obstacle at that time.

Insights into the schools:

You have to be careful. There might be teachers in the school who believe French is polluting and English is polluting Arabic, so this is why there is this feeling of discomfort.

Insights into a partnership:

It is best we find a private school where we do not need to receive government approval for participation. I know the Director of a school who might be interested in a project such as this. Not fundraising, but collaborating.

Many International Baccalaureate Schools (IB) are fortunate to have Creativity, Action, and Service (CAS) programs in place, because there is a coordinator position to arrange contacts and to be the liaison for the school, the students, and the community. In most elementary schools however, such a position does not exist. A contact person, who knows the country, culture, and history, as well as has a wealth of contacts, is instrumental in this process. As visitors to a country, we can never really fully understand the complexities of culture; we need a contact person to be able to discuss, reflect, and advise as we navigate our path.

Understanding Cultural Experiences and Embracing the “Inshallah” (If God wills it). Being an expatriate is a unique position. We are strangers, but we are not just
visiting tourists. We are interacting and living, but it is not our permanent home. I had been experiencing many negative issues being a foreign woman. I assumed many things about the men in the country, and even let my assumptions influence how I felt and acted towards the local school’s director throughout this entire process. I made assumptions and generalizations, only to realize he really was just a kind, cooperative, and respectful person. Contrary to what I was hoping to guard against, I realized I also made assumptions about what was best for the community, such as planting flowers in the neighbourhood near the school. As the research showed, interactive reflection with my colleagues would have assisted with these assumptions. As well, it would have opened the doors to further critical reflection and discussion about pedagogy as one host culture teacher explained:

The difference is in the discipline, the way of teaching. I feel that our way didn’t progress enough. Our program from the ministry of education is fraught. I want to do better, but I have a program that I have to follow. I feel that I am still missing experience.

I feel that for kids it is better to teach them their culture instead of stuffing them with data. Here with the ministry it is filling and filling.

In addition, throughout the project, I was attempting to promote intercultural literacy for my students, now realizing the importance of strengthening my own intercultural literacy. As Heyward (2002) suggests, becoming more competent in my own cultural understandings, attitude, language proficiency, and participation creates a stronger cross-cultural relationship. As well, this project was not just about learning how a culture works, for I truly believe I could spend a lifetime and still not reach a true understanding. It became about finding ways to grow and adapt to everything new, and
especially about relinquishing control and demonstrating flexibility in my roles. As I discussed this with a Tunisian colleague and friend, she laughed and commented:

*Inshallah. When I first started working here, it was difficult for me. This American school and teachers are always about planning, planning and dates and times. It has taken me, and is still difficult for me, to work in the American way. Tunisian people do not do this all the time. We say, “Inshallah”, if God wills it.*

I made most of the decisions as the partnership unfolded, which was not my intention. Fortunately, I have another chance to improve this situation for the future success of the partnership. *Inshallah.*

**Examining the School.** Examining what was already in place at my school was instrumental in the decisions I made affirming Maybach’s theory that, “what is imperative is that the school or agency coordinators are clear about what the service ethic means to them and that they understand their own biases and agendas” (1996, p. 235). I had the advantage of working at the school for a year before implementation of the project. This allowed me to make connections with the contacts, and to observe and reflect what was already happening in the school. For the most part, the model of reciprocity with the community was not always in place, as is the case in most IB schools. As well, when I first discussed the project with my immediate supervisor, it was not well received because it would only involve my class in partnership with the host school. Due to the size of the partner school, space was limited and I could not, therefore, invite our school’s other second graders to participate in the project. There are three sections of this grade and we try to do everything as a team, from our teaching to our excursions, primarily because the parent community tends to compare classrooms. It was suggested that I have my students participate in this partnership on Saturdays, when it was voluntary so the other second grades could be involved rather than during the week.
as I had planned. In spite of my administrator’s concerns, I went through with the project during the school week anyway, and carefully worded my letter to parents. To my knowledge, there were no complaints from any of the parents. The conversations with other colleagues and local staff about a project such as this informed my perspective. Some faculty and administration comments were:

*It’s not easy. Are you sure you want to take this on? Why go through the work? They get this in high school. I hope it doesn’t end up like our project. We were overwhelmed and it did not continue even though we promised we would return.*

It was further necessary consider the perspectives of our administrator about our current situation in the school:

*Trash strewn around our school, I pick it up every day. I don’t see many children picking it up. Because I don’t think we have a culture, an interschool culture that says that we take responsibility for that. We need to focus on what happens inside of the school first, before we go out to the community.*

Without the support or similar vision shared with colleagues and administration, a collaborative project can become an isolated venture making it difficult or impossible to implement, especially if the perceptions about SL ethics are not aligned. Equally important is the vision and perceptions shared by the host community.

**Challenging Perceptions.** My class was truly diverse -17% of the students identified themselves as European, 11% North American, 55% African, and 17% were Asian (some identified themselves with two continents). Yet, because they attend an American international school, they are often considered to be American and therefore viewed as such by members of the host community. Furthermore, the school is perceived somewhat negatively, as seen in this comment by a colleague:

*It is true that the school being in a middle class region or even a lower class region, even if we are discreet we are still, even if we are very discreet and try not
This project may have helped to dispel some of the mistrust and misinformation the students and teachers from the host community may have harboured once they realized these were just kids—kids who wanted to make friends.

Similarly, I am a white North American female representing an American School with a way of thinking and doing that is not always well received. As much as I feared the unknown throughout this, I sense that I was also feared because of my relationship with the school. The building of trust and relationships was essential to the success of a project that tried to incorporate “cooperation rather than domination” (Maybach, 1996, p. 235). I hope this project helped to put the collaborating teacher’s and students’ misgivings about me to rest – if they had any. Fortunately, their comments were always positive:

*It was when I saw the young Tunisians would become integrated with the young pupils of the American school, who come of all around the world, it is the exchange which was the most encouraging and which really had of very big value.*

*It is successful because one was able to discover another world. For us Arab people, it is another world.*

For my part, I developed a new appreciation for my co-teacher, and look forward to working with her again.
Chapter Five - Reflection

“There are no strangers here; Only friends you haven't yet met”

William Butler Yeats

Chapter Four described how this self-study was intertwined with obstacles and complexities. Based on this project, it is not surprising that many teachers would avoid collaborative projects with a host culture, for “research suggests that links with the local community have not been seen as important for either international school students or teachers” (Allen, 2000, p.133). Undertaking this project, however, has brought about an internal awareness, and, through the power of autoethnography, may possibly provoke discussion amongst other educators in similar situations and settings. I believe as do others (Bochner, 2001; Ellis, 1995, 2011; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994), that if an autoethnographer can create an engaging, accessible text that describes her personal and cultural experience, the research will reach a wider audience than through traditional research methods, and may make personal and social change possible for more people. This is especially important with international school teachers attempting to integrate or collaborate with the host culture or provide community service, often with the justification of “good intentions.” The idea of action based on good intentions needs to be questioned, examined and possibly changed by sharing our stories. I am again reminded of Ellis and Bochner’s words, which opened my thesis:

The stories we write put us into conversation with ourselves as well as with our readers. In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values. We take measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions, and the multiple layers of experience” (2000, p. 748).
I am pleased to report that after telling my story in my own school, the seed of change has been planted, and has the potential to grow. After my dialogue and interview with an administrator, she has agreed that elementary students and teachers will be encouraged to engage in projects with the local community, based on a partnership model of reciprocity, collaboration, action and reflection. She also supports the creation of a new position—a contact person to assist with the process of implementing collaborative projects. This contact person will assist with overcoming the language differences, the negative perception the community has of the school, and with the promotion of strong relationships, all of which were concerns during this research. This unintended outcome of my research was welcome news.

**Reflections on the Research Goal and Questions**

I now turn to the research goal and the sub-questions that I posed at the beginning of this thesis. My research goal was to build a respectful relationship between the children in an international school and children in the host country through a collaborative citizenship project. The related sub-questions included:

1. How might I engage my students in a SL project in the local community in a way that honours the needs and wishes of the community?

2. How will I ensure my students see themselves as co-creators of the service with the community rather than service providers?

3. How will I know if the participation of the local community in a collaborative project is a valuable pedagogical approach for students in an international school?
In order to find the answer to the first two questions, I tried to include the voices of all the participants in the data collection and analysis. I also tried to get the students together as much as possible to plan activities they deemed important. Whether their ideas represented the wishes of community is questionable, but they did have a voice and choice in the projects. Some projects, such as the beach clean-up, seemed to be appreciated by the community. In instances where I tried to interject my own ideas, such as planting flowers in the neighbourhood near the school, I instead listened to my co-teacher and we let the children take the flowers home. I may not have fully achieved the goal of honouring the wishes or meeting the needs of the community, but I believe the children truly saw this as a collaborative project where they worked together with their new friends.

In considering my answer to the third sub-question regarding whether this was a valuable pedagogical approach for students in an international school, I discuss the findings in relation to the following criteria to judge whether this was achieved: meeting curriculum standards, participating in experiential learning, developing intercultural literacy and developing student motivation and reflection. The students’ journals and comments, as well as my notes of their interactions and conversations with the students from the host community, provided the data for answering this question.

**Meeting Curriculum Standards.** The project was tied to the second grade social studies and science curricular standards of the school, in the areas of citizenship and the environment. When assessing the students on these standards, all students could explain and communicate the key ideas, but I was looking for transference. I tracked each time the students referenced the partnership during social studies or science, and the number
was zero. They did not seem to connect the two, unless prompted. Overall, our partnership was referenced by the students on twelve occasions, and all comments were during discussions about friendships, relationships, and end of the year reflections about favourite class excursions. To my knowledge, no negative parent responses were received throughout the project.

**Participating in Experiential Learning.** When assessing the students’ experiential learning in this project, the key component was reflection by the students. All of the students responded favorably to the experience and were highly motivated to continue as evidenced in their written reflections and comments in class meetings. However, more cycles of the experiential learning process including posing questions and finding the answers, would have helped to further enrich the social studies and science standards the students were learning.

**Developing Intercultural Literacy.** I followed Heyward’s model that was highlighted in Chapter Two to informally assess the intercultural literacy of the students within my classroom. As with all continuums, my students began at different places, and moved along the continuum at different paces. It was clear by the end of the project most had progressed along the continuum as they made friends with the other students. Heyward’s continuum was a useful tool in that it complemented the many other continuums used for assessment and goal setting in the elementary division. I hope to create a version of this continuum using more appropriate language for young students in order to include them in the assessment and reflection, as well as to use the continuum throughout the year, fully realizing that it is only a useful tool in schools that deem this type of literacy as important.
**Student Reflections and Motivation.** The majority of comments that came from the students about this experience were about friendships and spending time together, even though they mentioned that the language difference was difficult at times. The language differences (mine and the students) were more obvious within the formal classroom setting, as opposed to the informal playground get-togethers. My students were highly motivated and there was always 100% participation. Only the first visit required some encouraging of interaction. The written student reflections and discussions conveyed positive feelings overall, with some dismayed at the fact the project would not be able to continue for them the next year.

**Reflections on the Research Process and My Practice**

**Autoethnography and Respect for the Host Community.** Because I was writing daily about and reflecting on my experiences, the autoethnography helped me become aware of and resist the impulse to authoritatively enter a culture, exploit its members, and then leave to write about it for personal and professional gain, with little regard for the relationships with the host community (Conquergood, 1991; Ellis, 2007; Ellis et. al, 2011).

Autoethnography was the best approach for this study, as every aspect of the study included relationships within a foreign culture while investigating and collecting stories that were relevant both personally and professionally. Throughout this process, I was always worried about building relationships, addressing issues of power and showing respect for the host community. I have now learned that building mutual respect is the key to developing strong relationships. Strong relationships are strengthened by continuous interaction and exchanges in order for mutual trust and respect to grow.
Trust. Trust also came into play during the gathering of the data. Since I was not involved with the reflection aspect of the project in the partner school, I had to trust the responses of my co-teacher when she discussed her own and her students’ views of the project. When questioned by the translator, other participants in the collaborating school responded favorably about the project. I had to trust the respondents were being completely honest rather than simply being polite. I am well aware of the uniqueness of the situation and although I have no evidence of this, I sensed there may be the perception that I have power over the other participants because I teach in an international school.

I was hoping to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect; however, only the participants can judge whether this was achieved. Their comments were very positive, but again, I recognize that the participants may view my position as having power. I had my contact privately discuss the host school’s perceptions of the project, and it seems all those involved favored the experience. One colleague from the host school commented,

*It was very fruitful but we hope that the partnership sets wider dimensions. We need more exchange and some more interaction.*

Language Challenges. Language was also a challenge in the study. Not being fluent in Arabic or French, I had to rely on others for translation and discussion. This was especially difficult when I used one translator who was not trained in the field of education, and he mentioned more parts of the initial interview after it was finished when we were in a taxi debriefing. Of course he could not have known I found those points intriguing and knew they warranted further discussion. I had to return to interview people again realizing that interviews with a translator do not run as smoothly or as
naturally as ones in a common language. I learned that interviewing, especially when a
translator is involved, needs to be a multi-step process over a period of time, which could
allow for reflection and follow up questions.

**Conclusion**

The critical theoretical framework that guided this study was intended to produce
a story that may promote ethical discussion and reflection around the current SL terms
and models being incorporated in international schools. As well, it was meant to identify
respectful ways to involve a host culture in an international school and promote
intercultural literacy. As this study showed, these are incredibly important challenges for
an expatriate educator, especially when research shows that many Third Culture Kids
often enter careers that involve global service when they become adults. This could
potentially be the career path for many of my students. It is my hope that since many
graduates of international schools are drawn into careers of this nature, they will
remember school experiences such as this, and work to bring about change in
communities through a collaborative, reflective and mutually respectful process.

As well, many Third Culture Kids have no permanent home base and thus have a
feeling of rootlessness as a result of their world travel. Further evidence of the success of
a project such as this would be for the students to feel a sense of a connection to their
host country by having friends who are locals, and not expatriates. This would
demonstrate the strength and value of relationships that develop outside of the classroom.
Ideally, the graduates could return to the country in ten years and still have local friends,
when their expatriate friends have most likely moved on. They would have built some
authentic, lasting relationships based on trust.
Through this research, I have learned that there is value in venturing beyond the walls of the school into host communities where international schools are located. Not only do students learn about other cultures and begin to build a foundation of mutual respect, teachers too, learn the same lessons from these ventures, among other things. Besides the lessons I learned about myself, about SL and about working with people from another culture, I have learned that education is not static, nor something that can be completely predetermined. It is fluid, dynamic and constantly adjusting to the interactions among the players. Educational fluidity greatly depends on the teacher’s flexibility and willingness to relinquish control of the process, while at the same time working to build respectful relationships. This requires an awareness of one’s values, motives, actions—of one’s soul—for “teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul, onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together” (Palmer, 1997, p.15).

Afterwards

On September 14, 2012, while working through the revisions in this thesis, my school was attacked by an extremist group called Al-Qaeda. After attacking the United States Embassy, they then focused their attention on the school, broke in, and set fire to a building and some buses. It was an anti-American response to a film made by a U.S. citizen insulting the Islamic religion. It had nothing to do with the students who were the victims of such a disturbing attack. This extremist group did not understand that while my school is American by name, and in close proximity to the US Embassy, less that 12% of the students are actually US citizens. Even more shocking is the fact that they set
fire to the library because they undoubtedly believed it promoted anti-Islamic views, like the film. They did not realize however, that multiple copies of the Qur’an, their sacred text, were also housed in our library. By burning them, they ultimately cast as great an insult on their religion, as on the film they were protesting.

The fire left the school completely vulnerable. Hundreds of people in the community, bystanders and observers who were not necessarily part of the initial attack, seized an opportunity to loot and damage the school. There was over 5 million dollars’ worth of damage, and the looters did not hesitate to steal anything from computers, to musical instruments, to the pens in my desk drawer. As the staff and students grieved over this violation, most of what I heard by colleagues and students was, “Why do they hate us so much?” It is quite an unsettling feeling to hear that after the school was completely ripped apart, there were many celebrations on the streets in the community.

Because of the attack, this thesis and research took on a whole new level of importance for me. By collaborating and building partnerships and relationships with the community, I believe a foreign school will not be seen as an enemy or perceived with such obvious hatred. It is unfortunate, however, that because of this attack, the students are no longer permitted to leave the campus. Sadly, this is how this project has ended. Throughout the process, it has been clear that relationships are the key and these need time and opportunity to grow, and now this has come to a halt so abruptly.

While community relationships would not have made any difference with the fundamentalist group, I choose to believe it would have made a difference with the looters from the surrounding community if the school had a more inclusive relationship with the community, for no other reason than to challenge the misconceptions and the
myths of what takes place behind the high fenced walls of the school. More research is needed to explore the underlying issues and complex relationship between a foreign school and its host community. This small collaboration project barely touches the surface.

After this tragedy, many other local people in the community around the school expressed sorrow and disbelief at the actions of their neighbors, but there is irreparable damage, and the gap between “us” versus “them” has widened. The government apologized for not assisting the school with security and protection, and gave the school’s leased land as a gift, as well as forgave a significant tax debt. These gifts are undoubtedly provided with good intentions. I wonder, however, how the local community views such extravagant monetary gifts to a foreign agency when their own public schools suffer from lack of funding, and in many cases ineffective learning and teaching environments. I can’t help but think of my early mistakes of, “but my intentions are good” and finally coming to the realization that interacting and building relationships with different cultures is a complex and complicated place, where “good intentions” are the yearly birthday card dropped off in the mail by an absentee parent. It is an inadequate substitute for being present.
References


Project Based Learning (n.d). What is project based learning? Retrieved from http://pbl-online.org/About/whatisPBL.htm


Appendix A

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 26, 2011
TO: Stephanie Lynn Sawchuk

FROM: Dr. David Senkow
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Service-Learning in an International School (File #92S1011)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☑ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F), ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. ** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. ** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. David Senkow

cc: Dr. Carol Fulton – Faculty of Education

** supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca

Phone: (306) 585-4775
Fax: (306) 585-4493
www.uregina.ca/research
April, 2012

Dear Participants,

I am currently working on my master’s degree in Education. This year, data will be collected and used as a requirement for my thesis in the Master of Education Program at the University of Regina (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada). I am calling my study: Integration of a Host Culture Within an International School. This involves taking my students into the community and is connected to the standards in social studies and science. There will be approximately 8-10 visits over the course of 4 months.

The qualitative design is narrative inquiry. This is a self-study. Therefore, I may be collecting audio and visual recordings, reflection journals, surveys and/or interviews from you. This information will only be shared with my thesis committee members at the University, as well as a few of the staff members. All data will be stored with my advisor on the University of Regina campus. I require your consent to use the information gathered as I study this topic.

In order to protect the identity of those involved, I will not share any names.

Participation in this study is not mandatory.

If you have any questions or concerns about the procedures of this project, please feel free to contact me, or my thesis advisor, Dr. Carol Fulton, at __________. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions concerning the participant rights, please contact the Research Ethics office at research.ethics@uregina.ca.

If you consent to being a part of this study, please return attached page. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Sawchuk
Appendix C

Translation of Letter of introduction to French

Chère participante,
Cher participant,
Je suis en train de faire un master en programme d’éducation à l’Université de Regina (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada).
Mon projet de recherche s’intitule l’Intégration d’une culture d’accueil dans une école internationale. Ce qui implique l’immersion de mes élèves dans la communauté tunisienne en ce qui concerne les sujets des études sociales et des sciences reliés aux normes de l’école XXX
Sur 4 mois, il y aura approximativement de 8 à 10 visites à des écoles tunisiennes.
Ainsi, mon corpus se constituera d’enregistrements audiovisuels, d’interviews, et de questionnaires faits avec vous.
Cette enquête, pour collecter des données auprès d’enseignants locaux est une initiative personnelle.
Pour préserver l’anonymat des personnes interrogées, les informations personnelles rassemblées (noms, prénoms ...) ne pourront divulguées qu’aux membres du comité de thèse à l’Université de Regina, et à quelques membres du personnel de l’ACST.
Toutes les données seront stockées chez mon encadreur au Canada.
J’attire votre attention sur le fait que mon étude a été approuvée par le Comité de recherche de l’Université de Regina pour sa conformité aux normes d’éthique.
Si vous avez des questions ou des réserves concernant les procédures de ce projet, n’hésitez pas à me contacter à XXX ou contacter mon encadreur, le docteur Carol Fulton, à XXX
Si vous avez des questions concernant les droits des participants, contactez le Bureau des recherche éthiques à l’adresse suivante : research.ethics@uregina.ca
Si vous voulez me permettre de vous interviewer et vous consentez à faire partie de cette étude, j’aurai besoin de votre signature du formulaire ci-joint pour utiliser des informations réunies pour ma recherche.
N’hésitez pas à me contacter pour tout renseignement supplémentaire.

Bien cordialement
Stéphanie Sawchuk

Par la signature du présent formulaire, je reconnais avoir lu et compris la démarche de la recherche.
Nom du participant __________ Signature __________ Date __________

J’autorise que les photos prises peuvent être exploitées pour:
analyses* _____ et/ou publication* _____
et que les vidéos peuvent être utilisées pour: analyses *____ et/ou diffusion* _____

* Il est convenu que mes informations personnelles ne pourront être divulguées mais que je serai visible sur les images et vidéos faisant partie des résultats de l’étude.
Appendix D

Interview Questions for International School Educators

Please provide some information about your professional background in relation to international schools.

Please describe your experiences as an educator with incorporating the host culture into the international school.

Please describe your experiences with SL, PBL, community service and fundraising.

In reference to the above, what have been some successes? Obstacles?

Where/how do you see SL/PBL fitting into our school?

There are many different models of community service and SL. What does CAS follow?

Would you consider it to be effective? Why or why not? What changes would you make?

Do you think SL has a place in the Elementary division? Why/ Why not?

Describe some of the difficulty you have experienced with the many projects and partnerships.

Discuss some of the similarities and differences you have observed between Tunisian schools/our school and Tunisian teachers/our faculty.

Research shows SL/PBL and incorporating the host community is not seen as a priority for teachers at international schools. Why do you think this is?

Discuss any further comments or perspectives.
Appendix E

Questions for Educators in Partnering School

Please discuss your background, role, history as an educator, etc.

Please discuss your first thoughts when your Director mentioned this partnership.

What were some valuable moments for you in this partnership? For your students?

Please discuss your observations of your students, my students and their interaction?

Please discuss their reflections and what they said about the interactions.

In your honest opinion, what were the difficulties/problems?

Where were the areas you would suggest improvement? As teachers? For the students?

What do you feel your students learned? What did you learn?

Would you consider another partnership next year? Why or why not?

Discuss the comments and reactions made by your students.

Discuss comments and reactions made by the parents.