Introduction: Letters From Abroad

Linda Levine
Bank Street Graduate School of Education

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INTRODUCTION
linda levine

What counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts? When does going away help shape a clearer sense of home, and when does it not? How does living abroad change our perspectives as teachers and learners?

In his classic short story, “The Country of the Blind,” H.G. Wells’s hapless narrator stumbles into a foreign land where his deep-rooted assumptions are challenged and there is no foreseeable exit. Bewildered and frightened by what he cannot understand, Nunez rushes “to make the strange familiar,” instead of taking time to appreciate the unfamiliar on its own terms. This leads him through a series of blunders and misjudgments into real danger. Unprepared to imagine perspectives and choices other than his own, this first-time explorer cannot make the accommodations required—even for love—and barely evades disaster.

Far more fortunate, the educators who have contributed to this Occasional Paper share a formidable combination of purpose, curiosity, courage, and self-awareness. Reflecting on their choices to live and work in other parts of the world, they offer a provocative range of personal and professional explanations for seeking our the strange and unknown. Their letters from abroad reveal a genuine interest in what matters to others, a capacity to describe people and environments with intriguing detail, and a willingness to reveal themselves as inexpert newcomers. As these essays make clear, no preparation is ever sufficient because what happens always diverges from and exceeds our expectations. Risk-taking and error are inevitable, as integral to each story as the exhilarating discoveries that travel affords.

Most important, we learn how these educators came to value the experience of “otherness” in themselves as well as in those they met. They recognize how living through the displacements and disorientation afforded by travel enabled them to become more effective teachers in our own increasingly diverse society. Without denying their contributions to the communities they entered, the writers are thoughtful about having been outsiders—speaking with an accent, failing
to understand local references or jokes, learning how odd and unknowing they appeared to others who had very different premises and practices. All of these essays offer such sobering and indelible moments.

Today, we are more mindful than ever of the need for global awareness, understanding, and engagement. *Letters from Abroad* is designed to highlight what some Bank Street colleagues have sought, found, and questioned while working far from home. The editors of the Occasional Papers Series hope these missives from foreign shores will inspire others to set out on explorations of their own, explorations in which they resist the temptation to make the strange familiar and enjoy, if only for a short while, the way that the familiar itself may become strange.