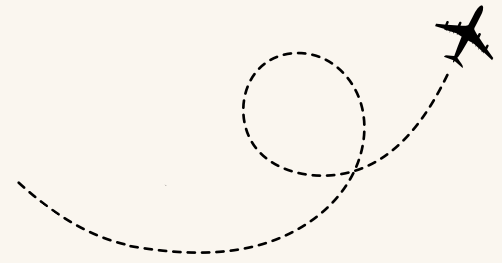


Diana Pacheco



Diana Pacheco has spent two decades in classrooms around the world, shaping young minds, building programs, and leading with intention. Today, she serves as Assistant Director of Elementary at The Village School in Houston, Texas, one of the most diverse private schools in the country. Her path to school leadership was forged through teaching experiences in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia and strengthened by her time as a student and instructional assistant at the Summer Principals Academy.

A Global Teaching Journey

Diana's teaching career began in Massachusetts, where she worked in both private and public schools as a special education teacher. While she developed a deep love for the classroom, she also felt a longing for change. Diana was inspired by colleagues who had taught overseas and began exploring international education agencies and attending job fairs. After receiving multiple offers, she debated whether to stay in the US or take the leap abroad—ultimately, a harsh nor'easter storm convinced her that it was time to go.

She landed her first international position at Al-Mizhar American Academy for Girls in the United Arab Emirates. Diana commented that "children with special needs, particularly children on the spectrum, weren't necessarily as developed socially as they were in the United States." In response, she helped launch the school's first inclusion classroom to support students transitioning from home-based services to a formal school setting.

Beginning as an early childhood interventionist and elementary teacher, Diana gradually took on greater leadership responsibilities—first as the math lead, and later as the math department chair.

After five years in the UAE, Diana moved to Egypt to teach kindergarten at the American International School in Cairo. She quickly realized that the school lacked a strong literacy framework and took the initiative to introduce a new writing program and writing committee. While the role allowed her to reconnect with the joy of teaching, Diana felt a growing desire to experience a country that was culturally distinct from those she had previously worked in.

This desire led her to the Kaohsiung American School in Taiwan. She began as a Pre-K teacher and later transitioned to third grade, balancing her love for hands-on instruction with increasing academic rigor. During her time there, she collaborated closely with the principal and grade-level leaders, an experience that further deepened her interest in school leadership.

Challenges of Moving Abroad

Adjusting to new countries came with a steep learning curve.

"The hardest move was the first one. The idea of packing and selling or throwing away whatever you have...and narrowing down your life...there's a lot of trust you have to have."

Each move brought its own set of challenges. In Egypt, Diana was deeply affected by the visible poverty. "Seeing so many people in the street begging, particularly children," she recalled, was a shock—even for someone who had grown up in the Bronx. The logistical hurdles were also significant; she remembered being one of 40 new hires given just 48 hours to find an apartment. The experience underscored for her the critical importance of clear, proactive communication between schools and incoming staff.

In Taiwan, Diana grappled with the challenges of navigating a country where English was rarely used.

"My brain couldn't make sense of anything. I didn't know if this store was a hardware store or if this store was a supermarket."

Everyday tasks became daunting. She remembered asking cashiers at 7-Eleven for help paying her bills and spending hours in grocery stores trying to locate basic ingredients.

Yet after the first couple months, things began to shift. “I started to get my groove, and I started to make friends,” she said. Although she initially wanted to leave at the end of her contract, Diana ultimately stayed for five years, remaining until she was ready to start her next chapter in school leadership.

Joining SPA

Diana first learned about SPA from her colleagues. “I was ready for a shift,” she said. The combination of intensive summer courses with year-long internships attracted her to the program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she attended both summers remotely from Taiwan.

SPA offered a new perspective on how schools operate. “I started to see my school differently,” she reflected. “Because of how the first part of the program works, I had tools to be more of a critical reflective thinker.” As she was exposed to administrative roles at her school in Taiwan, she learned the importance of mediating conflict and “navigating the political”—balancing the expectations of supervisors, supervisees, and peers.

“All of that just changed how I looked at myself as a teacher leader. I saw myself less as a teacher leader and more as an administrator.”

After graduating, Diana returned to SPA as an instructional assistant for courses on conflict resolution, law, and decision-making.

“The professors treated me like a thought partner...they saw the value of my experience and they used that.”

Diana noted the stark differences between cohorts. “That first cohort, there's just a lot of unpacking of your identity in that first summer, and it's hard.” Diana was struck by the cohort’s emotional intensity, which was amplified by the return to in-person learning. “But then you have the second cohort, and their issues tend to be more group dynamic issues.” Diana learned to balance individual and group support, using skills honed from her own time in the program.

Leading at The Village School

Currently, Diana serves as the Assistant Director of Elementary at The Village School. With students from 94 countries, the school is a living microcosm of global complexity.

“When people say that we are diverse, it's beautiful, but at the same time diversity comes with a lot of different conflict.”

Diana shared challenges navigating family dynamics, cultural celebrations, racial language, and gender identity, emphasizing the importance of promoting shared values and courageous conversations. She works with both students and adults to embrace diversity with empathy—promoting curiosity alongside the awareness needed to express difference in a respectful way.

Diversity also deepens self-understanding. Diana discussed her identity as a Puerto Rican woman raised in New York, which has equipped her with fluency in both collectivist and individualist cultures. “I’m not conflict-averse. I’m a New Yorker,” she said with a laugh. “But I do believe a lot in New York kindness.” Differentiating between niceness and kindness, she explained:

“You're only maintaining the status quo when you choose to be nice. Being kind is if you see that there's a problem, especially if it's something that hurts others, you say something. You can't hide, you can't sit on the side of nice.”

Looking Ahead

In addition to working at The Village School, Diana is finishing her doctoral degree at Arizona State University.

Her research focuses on the effects a consensus-building tool has on disrupting power dynamics in collaborative decision-making. She also became an adjunct professor at Simmons University, her alma mater. In the future, she would consider working in professional development for organizations, teachers, and teams. And she hasn’t ruled out going abroad again. “I would like to go back internationally again—this time in an administrative role,” she said.

Diana tells future SPA students that “you need to know if education is something you want to stay in in the long run.” She urges students to make connections—with your cohort, with your IAs, and with your professors.

“Really lean into getting to know those people because they will be your network beyond your year at SPA.”

“And if you want to go overseas, do it.”

Diana reflects that the hardest part is saying yes to the first job.

“You have sound decision-making skills. Use them and go. It'll change your life.”