Chapter 4

Studying Abroad to Inform Teaching in a Diverse Society: A Description of International Elementary Education Teaching Experiences at Ball State University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents information about Ball State University’s Study Abroad Program within the Department of Elementary Education. A general description of students enrolled in the Elementary Education program is given, both historically and currently. Then the origins of the Ball State Elementary Education Study Abroad program are explained, followed by a description of countries and program types that have occurred over the years. A general overview of program considerations, including making contacts, recruiting students, and working with schools is then provided. Next, three travel programs in the department are described, including development, recruitment, and vignettes focusing on experiences in each program. Next, research about program experiences is presented, including the impact of study abroad experiences on students. Personal reflections from instructors who have participated will then be shared. Finally, suggestions about developing and implementing programs will be identified.

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INTRODUCTION

The population of students in elementary and secondary schools in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically. It is important that teacher preparation programs prepare future teachers for the diversity they will encounter, so that they can effectively reach all students. Because of the impact that study abroad programs can have on students’ understanding of culture and language, increased empathy, and changes in attitudes towards diversity, the Department of Elementary Education at Ball State University has a long tradition of providing study abroad programs for students who will become future teachers.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe Ball State University’s study abroad program within the Department of Elementary Education, and its impact on student and faculty understanding of issues and contexts of diversity. First the literature on study abroad programs is examined, then an overview of Ball State University’s Elementary Education Study Abroad Program is given. Next, three specific study abroad programs are presented. For each, the course development and logistical issues are identified, followed by vignettes of faculty and student experiences in international and diverse settings. In the next section, research about the impact of study abroad experiences on students is shared. Finally, personal reflections about study abroad experiences are presented.

BACKGROUND

Research on study abroad programs has examined a variety of factors including personal development (Eby, 2005; Hadis, 2005; Kitsantas, 2004; Lindsey, 2005), increased cultural awareness (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009; Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe, & Hewstone, 1996), and empathy (Zhao, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009). All of these factors are critical to the development of teachers who are able to relate to and provide meaningful instruction for students from diverse backgrounds.

Personal Development

Students who participate in study abroad programs show definite signs of personal development, including being more independent, outgoing, friendly towards those of other countries, more self-assured, and more uninhibited towards traveling abroad than they were before they left (Hadis, 2005). Study abroad experiences have also been shown to increase participants’ independence, cultural awareness, ability to speak foreign languages, and desirability to future employers (Sutton & Rubin, 2004). In addition, those who travel to study abroad indicate increased emotional resilience, flexibility and openness, perceptual acuity, and personal autonomy (Kitsantas, 2004). Similar research has explored how study abroad experiences affect students’ personal and professional values (Lindsey, 2005). Results indicate that study abroad experiences enhance students’ self-awareness and lead students to challenge their own values and biases, while developing sensitivity. Furthermore, participants became more open-minded when considering personal and cultural values, and heightened their levels of self-awareness through reflection. Participants demonstrated an appreciation of difference, grew in culturally sensitivity, and demonstrated a stronger sense of social justice, primarily with racial and ethnic discrimination. These results suggest a growing willingness to learn from other cultures while critically examining one’s own culture.