Chapter 7

Creating a Studying Abroad Experience for Elementary Teacher Candidates: Considerations, Challenges, and Impact

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad experiences provide teacher candidates with opportunities to explore teaching and learning while immersed in diverse international and intercultural settings. International pre-service teaching experiences range from short trips to expose teacher candidates to diverse cultures to extensive internships in which teacher candidates complete their student teaching. In this chapter, the authors created a 4-week intensive field experience for teacher candidates and studied the key features of program design and implementation as well as the impact of participation on teacher candidates’ professional development.

INTRODUCTION

In teacher education, the role of field experiences in supporting teacher candidates’ professional growth cannot be understated. Teacher candidates often point to these “real world” experiences as having the most significant impact on their professional development, and individuals and professional groups have long advocated for field work to play a central role in teacher preparation (The Holmes Group, 1986; NCATE, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). This may be due in part to the fact that field experiences provide teacher candidates opportunities to “practice” teaching in scaffolded contexts with classroom teachers.

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Field experiences also provide an authentic context within which teacher candidates can grapple with perceptions of teaching and learning formed during their K-12 “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975) in light of developing theoretical understandings of teaching from their college coursework. During these critical junctures, teacher candidates are able to explore and refine their existing and developing teacher identity.

Field experiences typically occur within teacher candidates’ own local or state context. As a result, learning to teach occurs in a context that is at a minimum familiar and most likely quite similar to that which they experienced as a student. The familiarity can serve to cement their existing beliefs since it often “worked for them” as students. However, opportunities for learning to teach in an international setting provide a unique opportunity for teacher candidates to simultaneously question and confirm their pre-existing presumptions of teaching and learning, while exposing them to diverse international and intercultural teaching and learning experiences in schools (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009). While existing literature suggests field experiences, even in their simplest form, are complex terrains for teacher candidates to navigate, the literature on impact of an international placement on teacher candidates’ professional development is less robust. One has to wonder if upsetting the cultural apple cart of teacher candidates might expand their notions of teaching, learning and working with diverse cultures (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Marx & Moss, 2011).

Study abroad experiences, increasingly popular at colleges and universities in the United States, hold potential for enhancing teacher candidates’ worldview in the twenty-first century. Research on such programs suggests they are powerful educational tools, and participation often results in positive outcomes in terms of teacher candidates’ cultural sensitivity and acceptance of diversity (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005; Cushner, 2007). In teacher education, study abroad opportunities run the gamut from individual global internships to programmatic site-based field experiences in international locations (Brindley et al., 2009; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Wilson, 2015). Researchers assert studying abroad provides a field context for teacher candidates to simultaneously question and confirm their pre-existing presumptions of teaching and learning, and exposes teacher candidates to diverse international and intercultural teaching and learning experiences in schools (Brindley et al., 2009). As such, there is increasing attention to the role study abroad experiences may play in developing teacher candidates’ empathy toward other cultures as well as in enhancing their understandings of culturally responsive pedagogies (Marx & Moss, 2011; Ochoa, 2010; Rodriguez, 2011).

While the research on study abroad experiences in teacher preparation indicates myriad benefits from participation, there is limited literature on the ways in which programs are most successfully designed and sustained as part of teacher education curricula in the United States. Scant too are research studies documenting the long-term impact of study during teacher preparation on pedagogy. As a field, study abroad can no longer assume that immersion in an international context, in this case an international PK-6 context, leads to ideological and pedagogical shifts. As noted by Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012) in Student Learning Abroad: What our Students are Learning, What they’re Not, and What we can do About It, there is still is work to be done in creating frameworks for international programs that lead to long-term learning for teacher candidates. As Van de Berge and colleagues note, “The important questions, though, are not about whether students are learning anything or not; they are about what students are learning, about how they are learning, and about whether the process—the experience—of learning abroad is allowing them to develop competencies they might not have if they had stayed at home” (p. xii, 2012).
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