Chapter 14

Collective Learning: An Exploration of the Hong Kong and U.S. Special Education Systems

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ABSTRACT

As the demographics of U.S. student population continue to be diverse, teachers need to be equipped to teach and support students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Besides addressing this issue through the use of coursework and fieldwork experiences, research suggested that providing teacher candidates with international experiences could have an impact on their intercultural sensitivity and openness to cultural diversity. The purpose of this chapter was to share a unique, short-term, faculty-led study abroad program, which was a part of a graduate summer online course. Six special education teacher candidates participated in the program. During the study abroad, they had the opportunity to observe inclusive schools, interview special education policy makers, and learn strategies to support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and collaborate with their parents. Cultural activities and free explorations were also included. Upon their return, student participants utilized information and strategies they learned in their practice.

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that the demographics of the U.S. population continue to get more and more diverse. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that, by 2044, more than half of the U.S. population will belong to the minority groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). By 2060, almost 20% of the population will be foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Among the race groups, the Asian population is and will continue to be the fastest growing population, an increase of 128% projected between 2014 and 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Clearly, changes in the demographics of U.S. population impact the demographics of our student population. Between 2002 and 2012, there was a 16% decrease in the number of White students enrolling public schools, while there was a 20% increase in minority students, with Asian and Hispanic students...
as the two largest groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015a). However, 82% of the teacher population remained White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Furthermore, the number of English language learners has also increased, 9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b). According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Programs (NCELA), at least 7% of all English language learners received special education services (NCELA, 2011).

In order to ensure that teachers are equipped to teach and support students whose cultural backgrounds are different from theirs, coursework and field experiences about working with English language learners with and without disabilities are included in teacher preparation programs in most of the states. Additionally, many universities have incorporated international experiences in their programs, so teacher candidates can have more exposures to different cultures. The purpose of this book chapter is to share the development of a short-term faculty-led study abroad program and its impact on pre- and in-service special education teachers’ practices in regards to working with families from diverse background.

Addressing Diversity

While policy makers and practitioners do not question the teaching ability of White teachers, research consistently suggests that students who are taught by teachers from the same race are more likely to make progress (Dee, 2004; Diller & Moule, 2011; Nieto & Bode, 2011), because some teachers lack cultural competency and have presumptions of students whose race are different from theirs (Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva, Wodrich, & Kasai, 2014; Newkirk-Turner, Williams, Harris, & McDaniels, 2013). These presumptions can impact how teachers support students in their classrooms. In one study, Dee (2004) focused on a cohort of students progressed from kindergarten through third grade in 79 elementary schools, and compared the performance of students who were assigned to the same race with the performance of those with teachers of a different race. Results of the study indicated that students who were assigned to teachers of the same race had a two to three percent increase in their academic performance.

Similar results were found in a recent study by Egalite, Kisida, and Winters (2015). The researchers examined the Florida student reading and math tests scores in grades 3 to 10 between the 2001-2002 and the 2008-2009 academic year. The relationship between student performance and race of the teachers was investigated. Results suggested that students who had teachers of the same race were more likely to do well, especially at the elementary school levels. When comparing the race groups, African American student performance at the elementary levels was likely to benefit more when they were taught by African American teachers, while student performance of Asians at the secondary levels was likely to improve when they were taught by Asian teachers. These results could be due to the trust and respect students developed when they were taught by teachers of the same race (Dee, 2004).

In order to address the need to support and provide students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds with effective instruction, many states, such as Arizona and Massachusetts, have implemented policies requiring Structured English Immersion (SEI) endorsement for all licensed teachers, principals, and superintendents (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). Coursework and fieldwork hours, ranging from 90 to six semester hours, related to working with English language learners are built into the teacher preparation programs. Furthermore, at least 17 of the states have mandated their teacher preparation programs to ensure that teachers know how to address the needs of English language learners with disabilities (Ballantyne et al., 2008).