Chapter 17

Teacher Candidates in International Contexts: Examining the Impact on Beliefs about Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

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ABSTRACT

Colleges of education are under pressure to produce globally competent teachers. Within this context, there has been increasing support for participation in international field experiences. This chapter presents findings associated with a study abroad experience on preservice teachers’ cultural awareness and efficacy for culturally responsive practices. Implications will address the development of understanding of the various issues that surround international teaching experiences for preservice candidates.

INTRODUCTION

Given the increasing diversity seen in classrooms in the United States and relative homogeneity of those entering the teaching profession (Gay, 2010), institutions of higher education must engage in a deliberate focus on preparing teacher candidates to meet the needs of children who enter school with diverse experiences and from backgrounds that may differ greatly from their own. This includes developing teachers who possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary “to teach for diversity, equity, and interconnectedness in the local community, nation, and world” (Merryfield, 2000, p. 430). Acknowledging this context, colleges and universities have directed specific attention toward incorporating coursework to develop students’ global and cultural competency. This is important, yet insufficient as candidates’ direct experiences with culturally and linguistically diverse children are limited, diminishing the potential for connections between content and practice (Cushner, 2007; Quezada, 2004), perpetuating an oft-cited shortcoming of teacher education in general. It is within the context of practice, i.e., direct experience,
that the most significant learning takes place. As a result, teacher education programs must consider a variety of strategies to ensure teacher candidates have the curricular opportunities, including coursework and experiential learning, to adequately prepare them to enact the practices and develop the dispositions vital to the success of the diverse children found in today’s classrooms (Young, 2010).

One mechanism that has been utilized successfully to help teaching candidates bridge the relationship between theory and practice is the field experience. Field experiences allow candidates to apply pedagogical strategies directly within a context of practice (Zeichner, 2010). Focusing on the development of practices noted as impactful for diverse learners, e.g., culturally responsive teaching, this would include field experiences in contexts where preservice candidates directly engage with diverse people and communities unfamiliar to them and where candidates can link coursework in multicultural or global education to practice. Often these field experiences are proximal to the candidates or university; however, it is becoming more common for colleges and universities to introduce study abroad programs of various durations that include international teaching experiences within their respective teacher preparation programs (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Malewski & Phillion, 2009; Willard-Holt, 2001). These international experiences have been shown to offer a range of benefits for preservice candidates, including increased self-efficacy and a greater awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Quezada & Alfaro, 2007). Thus, there appears to be great potential for candidates to simultaneously improve consciousness and understanding of diverse peoples, while learning to apply pedagogical skills and strategies within authentic contexts.

This chapter represents a synthesis of several of the aforementioned topics and will serve three primary objectives. First, it will present the literature necessary to establish a background for examinations of international field experiences, including information on candidate perceptions/beliefs, culturally responsive teaching, intercultural competency, and field experiences (in general). Second, it will describe an investigation that examined the impact of a short-term international program that included immersion in schools on candidates’ beliefs and perceptions about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children. Third, it will discuss and provide considerations relevant to various programmatic elements, including overall objectives, duration, and candidate support, necessary when planning and implementing international teaching experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory described human behavior as the result of the interactions between individual (self), environmental, and behavioral elements. In the triadic reciprocity model of causality (Bandura, 1986), the relationship between these three elements is characterized by mutual influence. For example, factors in the environment, such as the method of instruction or teaching context, affect personal factors, including expectations for or attributions of success/failure and the formation of goals. Behavioral elements, including performance and effort expenditures, are directly impacted by the personal factors, e.g., expectations for success. Finally, performance, a behavioral element, influences the learning environment, e.g., poor performance may result in additional attention from an instructor.