Chapter 20

The Benefits and Limitations of a Short-Term Study Abroad Program to Prepare Teachers in a Multicultural Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a group study abroad program in which 12 U.S. participants (6 pre-service and 6 in-service teachers) traveled to South Korea to enhance their cultural awareness of Korea and to then develop curricula pertaining to Korean history, the arts, area studies, and literature. The authors describe what the program focused on and how the curriculum activities were designed and implemented. Further, an overall theoretical framework for the project and a summary of research findings is presented. Overall, findings note that the participants’ level of perceived cultural awareness was not significantly altered through participation in the program. Additionally, this chapter reports whether and how participants’ future perceived pedagogical practices were changed as a result of participating in this program. Suggestions for how to diversify the U.S. teacher workforce are also discussed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1057-4.ch020
INTRODUCTION

U.S. classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse with each passing year. Consequently, classroom teachers are expected to interact with a rapidly changing student population. In New Jersey, Asians are one of the fastest growing groups among the state population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), New Jersey is home to 747,620 Asians, accounting for 8.5% of the state population. Likewise, Koreans constitute about 9.7% of all Asians in the U.S. and 12.8% of Asians in New Jersey. The approximately 96,000 Koreans who live in New Jersey represent 1.1% of the state’s population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) and have become the third largest Asian student body in the New Jersey school system.

However, in New Jersey, there is a disparity between the growing K-12 Korean student population and the small number of Korean educators who could ideally serve as role models for students of Korean ethnicity. Worse yet, studies suggest that there is a lack of understanding of this population’s unique cultural needs (Jung, Stang, Ferko, & Han, 2011), along with teaching resources about the Korean Peninsula written in English that P-12 teachers can use in their classrooms. Accordingly, in order to better develop pedagogical practices for effective teaching and learning, there is a need for training and curriculum development that addresses current gaps (Bennett, 2001). For instance, Gay (1995, 2000) contends that teachers should be aware of the richness, complexity, and vitality of American cultural diversity, the cultural experiences, values, characteristics, and learning styles of different ethnic students, and develop concrete skills relative to curriculum design, instructional strategies, and interaction abilities. Teachers also need to be aware of the subtle but powerful forms of cultural discrimination and how cultural overtones affect class dynamics and ultimately, students’ cognitive and affective learning (Tidwell & Thompson, 2008).

Rightfully, there have been several approaches to tackle this issue in teacher preparation programs, such as culturally responsive teaching, study abroad programs for preservice teachers, international field experiences or student teaching that provides pre-service teachers with opportunities for acquiring multicultural competencies (Hasslen & Bacharach, 2007; Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011; Valentin, 2006). Among various approaches, research has indicated that despite curricular and institutional efforts made to address diversity in many teacher preparation programs, pre-service teachers most value guided exposure to “real-world” cross-cultural interactions and observations. There is thus a call for approaches that move beyond the isolated-course approach (Jennings, 2007, Ngai, 2004, Taylor & Sobel, 2003). To address this, the U.S. Department of Education has advocated for more immersive international experiences, through the provision of new grant opportunities, such as the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program (http://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsgpa/index.html).

William Paterson University, a state university in northern New Jersey, is located in a geographic region that is a melting pot of several different Asian cultures, with students of Korean ethnicity representing more than 40% of the K-12 student population in several municipalities (Perez-Pena, 2010). That said, as noted in many newspaper accounts, the educators who teach these students are predominantly white. Further, many of these educators have not had the opportunity to travel extensively overseas or learn about the cultural beliefs and values of their students. As a means to enhance cultural understanding and improve pedagogical practices, William Paterson University was funded to carry out a grant program entitled “The US-NJ-South Korea Project: Exploring Korea’s History, Culture and Education..."