Chapter 21

From Cultural Immersion to Professional Growth: Effects of Study Abroad Experiences on Classroom Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study that explores impacts of the cultural immersion afforded from a study abroad program on teachers’ professional growth over time. First, the study examined two teachers’ cultural immersion process from their reflections and survey answers collected before, during, after the study abroad. Second, impacts of the study abroad experiences on classroom instruction were explored, using descriptive case study and phenomenology methods. Data from semi-structured interviews and teacher lesson observations were analyzed to explore to what extent the teachers infused diversity and multiculturalism in their instruction. The results of the study describe lived experiences of the two teachers who participated in a summer study abroad program that allowed unique experiences of cultural immersion and professional growth as a classroom teacher. The chapter also includes suggestions for future research that explores impacts of study abroad programs on teachers and their students.

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INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape in the United States is in constant flux. Today, U.S. schools have a large number of students whose primary language is not English. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are approximately 5 million English Learners (ELs) in the States, comprising 10% of the all students nationwide. In 2012–13, six states with the highest percentages of EL students in their public schools were Alaska, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas. In California, the percentage of EL students in public schools was nearly 23 percent (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2015). Some states, such as Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, South Carolina, and West Virginia, have seen a 100% increase in ELs between 2004-05 and 2011-12. Moreover, the needs of ELs become complex since their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are increasingly more diverse. A closer look at the school-age population attending P-12 grade reveals that the changes do not involve foreign-born students exclusively as the growing presence of ELs can no longer be attributed to immigrants alone (OELA Fast Facts, 2015). In other words, schools are facing the challenge of having to serve a broader spectrum of ELs that goes from recent immigrants to third-generation US-born citizens. Not only do these students present a wider range of linguistic backgrounds and educational experiences, but also a more varied, complex set of upbringings (Han & Love, 2015). Expanding teachers’ skills set is required so that they can meet the needs of all students, regardless of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds or prior educational experiences. One way to address this professional development need is to provide teachers with global experience that allows them being immersed in different cultures and languages. Research suggests that teachers’ immersion international experiences affect their understanding of students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as increases their cultural awareness and competencies in dealing with diversity and multicultural education in school (Armstrong, 2008; Cushner, 2007). In fact, teachers’ study abroad programs continue to grow in U.S. teacher education programs as an innovative method to improve teachers’ knowledge and multicultural competencies in today’s diverse school settings (Marx & Moss, 2011).

This chapter addresses the paucity of research on teachers’ study abroad experiences that promote cultural immersion and professional growth over time. This chapter presents a case study that explores two teachers’ participation in a four-week summer study abroad program to South Korea with support of the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad grant. The purpose of the study is to examine impacts of the cultural immersion afforded from the study abroad program on the participating teachers’ professional growth over time as a classroom teacher. The study documents two teachers’ lived study abroad experiences and explores changes and growth in their instructional practice after the trip by examining the extent to which they infuse their multicultural knowledge and experiences into literacy instruction. The chapter also discusses experiential learning opportunities that study abroad programs can offer for teachers, so that they can effectively transfer what they learn overseas into their classroom instruction.

BACKGROUND

Culturally Immersed Experiences for Teachers

For the past decades, addressing diversity has been a critical issue in U.S. teacher preparation programs. Despite increasing demands for teachers to teach for equity, diversity, and multiculturalism in U.S. schools,
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