Chapter 9

Teacher Education Advocacy for Multiple Perspectives and Culturally Sensitive Teaching

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing diversity in U.S. classrooms, the need for teachers who are culturally sensitive is critical (Marx & Moss, 2011). While elementary and early childhood pre-service teachers have multiple opportunities throughout the teacher education program to work with diverse learners in schools and communities, they do not have much international experience. The Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education program at a southeastern university have undergraduate and graduate certification programs in which performance assessment is emphasized. The purpose of this chapter is to show how exposing teacher candidates, especially undergraduate pre-service teachers to self-reflection through observation and teaching in an international study abroad program, can enhance the knowledge base of preservice teachers’ perceptions about another culture and thus show new ways of thinking, questioning and possibly changing their attitudes towards those with backgrounds that are different from their own.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2906-4.ch009
INTRODUCTION

As our society becomes more and more pluralistic, our institutions of higher learning respond to the ever growing need to produce a workforce that is keenly aware of the values of diversity and demonstrates inclusive excellence, and teachers are on the front lines engaging students, the next generation’s leaders, to learn and to think. Such learning takes place in many environments and is a result of a diversity of lived experiences (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Advocacy for learning in a real world context is socially responsible and is imperative for education to be transformative, relevant, and reciprocal. As teachers learn and learners teach, in the act of teaching one becomes a change agent, a cultural agent of transformation (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1997).

Change agency comes as one byproduct of cultural sensitivity developed from immersion, exposure and interaction. Authors assert that learning in a social context is an opportunity that has the potential to help expose students to themselves, before they expose themselves as teachers. Giving them the facilitated opportunity to confront what they don’t know, and haven’t seen, but will likely be a real part of their work. While this can occur and can be contextualized within the United States of America, authors contend it can also be an impactful experience acquired abroad. The international context is indeed different from the domestic one, but the international context gives the educator and the student the opportunity learn in a different context from a field experience in a state they’ve grown up in and potentially have never traveled away from. When distilled, these abroad experiences can foster perspective-taking and awareness of communities and issues within society teachers, as human service professionals, will surely encounter in their local communities.

In this chapter the authors assert that using the teacher preparation field experience in a study abroad environment offers students preparing to be teachers an opportunity to engage in a real world context that assists in the following: (a) development of cross-cultural knowledge, (b) culturally sensitive skill development for best practice (inclusive and responsive), (c) broader professional awareness, attitudes, and worldview (Baptiste, Ryan, Araujo, & Duhon-Sells, 2015), and (d) awareness of educators as cultural agents (Freire, 1985).

Our intention in writing this chapter has been to share how a short-term study abroad program with field- and community-based experiences was designed and implemented to advocate for the inclusion of multiple and cross-cultural perspectives through lived experiences in teacher education and leadership programs. We support this view with the description of a global study abroad program in Malawi, Africa during the 2012 and 2013 mini-summer sessions. We include student and faculty reflections on the experiences abroad as well as pre-departure and post-arrival (back in the southeast United States) reflective discussions. We share how we collaborated across content program areas (early childhood, elementary, counseling, and kinesiology education), and with different institutions and communities to create these global experiences in teacher preparation for both our Preservice and Inservice teachers and leaders. We discuss other programs of study abroad only to engage the reader in our thinking process as we developed these and future plans. Our overarching goal is to provide opportunities to immerse preservice teachers in our programs in cultures different from their own, and develop cultural awareness and sensitivity as we advocate for shifts in perspectives of and assumptions about “other people’s children” (Delpit, 2006). The intention is for our students to have experiences that will then extend back home to local, domestic cultural experiences in which they have tools for effective, culturally sensitive teaching and learning. We achieve this through intentional and intensive engagement in several global community and classroom based experiences and follow-up discussions that we share in this chapter.