

LEARNING GLOBALLY, TEACHING LOCALLY

INCORPORATING INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING INTO PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

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ABSTRACT:

As the US student population becomes increasingly diverse, teacher education programs need to enable prospective teachers to meet the varied needs and expectations of students and families, while, simultaneously, creating viable classroom communities. Learning opportunities, such as travel and teaching abroad, and the perceptions of “otherness” this creates, lead to new perspectives regarding human differences. Such experiences, if wisely structured, can rectify misconceptions and reverse stereotypes. This paper explores the impact of teaching-related travel on novice teachers’ cultural understandings and professional identity. The paper will discuss how prospective teachers challenge their perceptions of their professional self through international field experiences. The goal is to begin a discussion that explores the internationalization of teacher training. We will also discuss the role such training can play in the expansion and increased flexibility of classroom practices for teachers and,

through them, the growth in international awareness and the intercultural sensitivity of their students.

Fueled by rising immigration and the baby boom echo, U.S. public school enrollment has increased steadily through the early 2000s and is expected to peak at an all-time high of 50 million in 2014 (Institute of Education, 2008). Forty-three percent of public school students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group in 2004, an increase from 22 percent in 1972, while the percentage of public school students who were White and of European descent decreased from 78 to 57 percent.

Although classrooms have gotten more diverse, the faculty lounges have not. Over 80% of America's public school teachers are middle-class Euro-American White women from rural areas, small towns or suburbs, who grew up in largely White neighborhoods and graduated from largely White high schools. They have little experience or knowledge of diverse cultures (FERENCE & BELL, 2004).

Yet, as teachers of immigrant/refugee youth, as well as of indigenous minority youth, they are seldom aware of the history, values and traditions of non-European cultural groups, whose mores and customs sometimes clash with mainstream American culture (Yeh et al, 2005; Young, 2001). As a result, most teachers do not see themselves as ready for a multicultural classroom. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1999) found that only 20% of the U.S. teachers expressed confidence in their ability to work with children from diverse backgrounds.

This lack of readiness is a serious problem. Many studies report negative educational outcomes associated with a failure to align student culture and teacher practice (Mahon, 2006) and teacher inability to create an environment incorporating cultural sensitivity and understanding of how to interact with families from diverse backgrounds (FERENCE & BELL, 2004; Yeh et al, 2005; Young, 2001). The disparity between teachers' identities and experiences and those of their students creates classrooms where teachers are unable to adequately address the needs of this multicultural student cohort (Gibson, 2004).

Lack of cultural confidence may impact where teachers teach, as well as how they teach. Hollins and Guzman (2005) reported that prospective teachers held negative attitudes and beliefs about different cultures and were unwilling to teach in urban schools, schools that tend to be more ethnically diverse than suburban or rural institutions.

These attitudes may be due to current and prospective teachers' lack of experience with different cultures and lack of knowledge of their own background. The majority of prospective teachers do not recognize that they have a culture, nor do they see racial, ethnic and cultural differences between themselves and their students (Finney & Orr, 1995, Mahon, 2006). The lack of recognition of and sensitivity to cultural and community differences, especially in terms of formal school experiences make it difficult for teachers to successfully handle the needs of diverse

classrooms, particularly in relation to issues of discipline and management (Mahon, 2006). Bennett (1986), Findlay (1995) and McCalman (2007) all note that educators who ignore both their students' and their own cultural attributes risk misinterpreting the variety of ways students, families, teachers and faculty participate in classroom communities in terms of how they communicate and articulate their world views.

In response to this challenge, a host of multicultural educational programs and supports has been created. Many teacher-training programs require prospective teachers to take at least one course focusing on diversity, in which they develop a largely theoretical understanding of culture. A better hope for developing cultural competence is offered by an international practicum experience for prospective teachers. Findings indicate that study abroad experiences enhance intellectual growth, personal development, and global mindedness (Adler, 1974, Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). Participating individuals acquire a new understanding about life, culture, self and others (Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004), which translates into increased intercultural sensitivity. New teachers who have participated in study abroad programs demonstrate a broader understanding of their classroom role by demonstrating a heightened ability to interact with and teach diverse students (Mahon & Cushner, 2002).

Study abroad programs support this process of enhancing intercultural competence, but evidence suggests that teaching abroad makes more significant and long-lasting changes in teachers' classroom practices. Evidence (Mahon & Cushner, 2002) suggests that that only powerful, lengthy, direct, engaging, person-to-person interactions allows new educators to develop skills that enable them to work effectively with individuals from other cultures. International placements allow new teachers to recognize the importance of culture its connection to the community, and the relationship between language, culture and practice (Roose, 2001).

As a result of their experiences, these prospective teachers learn to embed flexibility and cultural responsiveness in all areas of their professional practice, including classroom discipline, interactions, relationships, and shared respect with students, families and colleagues (Mahan & Strachowski; 1992, Hayden & Thompson, 1998).

International experience provides prospective teachers with the tools needed to do this, as they recognize the possibilities for change in their own teaching situations. Former international teachers see themselves as risk takers, more willing to teach differently than their colleagues (Roose, 2001; Romano, 2007). They learned how to do without the pre-packaged materials and lesson plans that were unavailable in their foreign classrooms and thus became more creative in their teaching (Hayden & Thompson, 1998)

On a deeper level, prospective teachers with significant international experience became less ethnocentric (Deardorff, 2006; Dolby, 2004) and found learning potential in all situations. Re-thinking their view of the world and rejecting negative stereotypes, they began to see the positives and possibilities in their own teaching. They questioned their beliefs and stereotypes about their own and other cultures and developed empathy for others and an appreciation of the various perspectives governing people's behavior throughout the world. Hanvey (1982) called this phenomenon "perception consciousness" (p. 162), suggesting that prospective teachers recognized that their worldviews, are not universally shared. This mirrors Dolby's (2004) contention that U.S. students utilize self-evaluation during study abroad opportunities to assess and deepen their understanding of American values, as contrasted with the values of other cultures and nations.

Prospective teachers who taught abroad attained higher levels of confidence in their intercultural and professional competence, thereby growing their self-efficacy. Confronting new and different situations, perhaps even frightening ones, and having to act and make choices overseas, prospective teachers faced personal anxieties and tested their own limitations to create a "space for opportunity and empowerment" (Mahon & Cushner, 2002, p. 5). That space gives room for growth in self-confidence and esteem, increases adaptability, resourcefulness and persistence. Confident teachers are likely to be better teachers (Gibson & Denbo, 1984; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003).

However, international experiences are not always positive. The experience overseas in many ways is similar to the first year of teaching, in which the individual must deal with classroom management, instruction and communication, without the benefit of another teacher in the room, and with a host of personal issues related to being on one's own without an active professional support system (Garii, 2008; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Romano, 2007). Many participants felt personally lonely, isolated and unwelcome, and professionally frustrated, ineffective and insecure (Garii, 2008). For some, the experience created or reinforced negative stereotypes about the host culture, educational system and people.

Yet all participants agreed that their cross-cultural teaching experiences were among the most critical experiences in their teacher preparation. (Hayden, Rancic & Thompson, 2000; Hayden & Thompson, 1998; Roose, 2001). The impact of these experiences appears to be long term and far reaching, although, at the time, the participants may not be conscious of the benefits they actually derive from having taught at a foreign school (Eherenreich, 2001; Hayden & Thompson, 1998). After their return to the United States, participants became attracted to and appreciative of differences (Al-Issa, 2004; Hayden & Thompson, 1998). They were more global-minded than their stay-at-home colleagues, more likely to be involved in international activities, had more friends and

colleagues in other countries, were more interested in global issues and other cultures (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

That appreciation of diversity and difference carried over to their classrooms when these individuals became teachers themselves. The concern with global diversity and equity seemed to be associated with concern with local diversity and equity. These new teachers articulated a strong belief in multicultural education and recognition that differences do not mean deficiency, but are potentially enlightening, friendly and positive (Roose, 2001).

Additionally, curriculum, unit, and lesson planning were impacted by the prospective teachers' international experiences. They used their knowledge of the culture and values of their host communities to design instructional materials and activities that were culturally responsive and acknowledged and validated the values, beliefs and experiences of the young people in their classrooms and they helped colleagues do the same (Hayden & Thompson, 1998; Roose, 2001).

More importantly, they believed in their ability to teach diverse students and, concomitantly, in the ability of those students to learn (Romano, 2007; Roose, 2001). The self-efficacy and cultural awareness they developed during their foreign placement allowed them to understand, motivate and praise students more often and guide them more successfully in their learning (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Hayden, Rancic & Thompson, 2000; Romano, 2007).

Prospective teachers who had taught internationally often structured their classrooms back in the U.S. to create the feeling of community that they admired in their foreign towns and schools. Having been the uncomfortable "other" themselves in the not too distant past, they said they would not allow that feeling to permeate their own classrooms (Roose, 2001). As former "fish out of water," they empathized with and appreciated their students' struggles to navigate different cultures and languages and they recognized how learning processes in schools and classrooms are stalled when students cannot communicate effectively, due to language and/or cultural barriers (Garii, 2008; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003).

The skills needed "to go sensitively and gracefully into a new culture" (Roose, 2001, p. 45) that the prospective teachers acquired during their international placements allowed them to become both cultural brokers, serving as a resource for colleagues, and cultural mediators, guiding activities and experiences of the school community to create culturally sensitive classrooms and curricula.

Evidence from researchers and practitioners suggest that all teachers should have the opportunity to live and study in diverse and unfamiliar environments as a means of enhancing school programs and student learning (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Stachowki & Sparks, 2007).

However, at many institutions, international opportunities are not available for prospective teachers, often due to a requirement that most or all of the prospective teacher's practicum be completed

locally. Internships abroad create logistical and financial challenges for prospective teachers, requiring them to shoehorn an extra course or series of courses into an already crowded curriculum, while incurring additional debt associated with flights and housing. However, the most significant factor deterring students from studying abroad was their own multicultural apathy. Many prospective teachers are not interested in living and learning about a different culture (Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

We are left with the question of how to encourage prospective teachers to step out into the unfamiliar world. The answer may be to economize, regularize, de-stigmatize and Americanize the international experience.

To economize, we will have to identify ways to save prospective teachers money and time. Short-term placements in less Westernized countries might be a realistic solution. This is not to say that anywhere, any time, would work to create a more interculturally competent teacher. Locations must be carefully chosen. They must be sufficiently foreign to provide cultural immersion, but not so foreign that the less worldly students would drown.

We must keep in mind that the majority of prospective teachers in the U.S. are not global travelers; many, in fact, have never been out of the country (FERENCE & BELL, 2004). So they (and their parents) are likely to reject placements in non-traditional locations with limited amenities. What these prospective teachers might accept are placements in developing nations in, for example, Central Europe or the Mediterranean, which are foreign, but still familiar. They also might consider placements in our own hemisphere, particularly the Americas. Opportunities abound in French Canada and Spanish-speaking Mexico and Central America, and placements there can provide pre-service teachers with as much of an intercultural experience as can be found in Paris or Madrid. Even vacation destinations in the Caribbean have schools, and many urban children in large U.S. cities have close family ties to these islands. Thus, asking prospective teachers to complete an internship in the Bahamas or on Dominica, for example, would provide them with meaningful cross-cultural experiences that would offer insights into the lives of their students in the U.S.

Some intranational placements may work nearly as well. The Navajo reservations in the southwestern United States (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007) offer prospective students an introduction to indigenous cultures and languages that do not reflect “middle America.” Communities along the southern border of the U.S. share language and culture with much of northern Mexico and are accessible to prospective teacher without passports or visas (FERENCE & BELL, 2004). Inner city schools offer an “otherness” opportunity for White, middle class, prospective teachers, as do schools in Appalachia and in isolated rural communities in the South and West. (Findlay, 1995; Hollins & Guzman, 2005).

The school year as we know it in the United States runs from September to June, acting as a constraining factor in the placement of prospective teachers in non-U.S. settings. However, many European nations begin the academic year in August and end in early July while schools in the southern hemisphere begin in February and end in November. Thus, prospective teachers could use these different school calendars to add an international teaching practicum placement to their training, while still completing their local placements in a timely manner. International placements could be completed in summers or during school breaks. In other words, if we want our pre-service teachers to take advantage of international opportunities, we have to incorporate the experience into the education curriculum, making such experiences an add-in, not an add-on, to teacher training.

Incorporating international placements in the curriculum means more than just offering credit hours. It means making culture a part of the courses the student will take at home. From their initial entry into their teacher education program, prospective teachers struggle to comprehend basic educational techniques. They focus on classroom management, lesson planning, school routine, and daily survival, to the exclusion of careful reflection on the daily life, values, history and aspirations of the school community (Garii & Soohoo, 2008). Many prospective teachers are unable to acknowledge, articulate, or address issues related to culture in the classroom (Blair & Jones, 1998).

International teaching placements are particularly valuable because they offer prospective teachers authentic opportunities to evaluate their own understanding of their world, their practice, and their students in less formal, less didactic settings. For prospective teachers to be able to initiate genuine intercultural learning, teacher educators have “to provide them with not only conceptual frameworks for culture learning which support individual processes of cultural understanding before, during and after their [international practicum experience], but also with adequate methodologies for intercultural learning and teaching as teachers in their classrooms” (Eherenreich, 2006, p.195).

Such support would be embedded in a for-credit preparatory course that deals specifically with the international teaching assignment (Brennan & Cleary, 2007; Mahon & Espinetti, 2007). Through such coursework, prospective teachers become familiar with theories and issues related to diversity, globalism, culture, intercultural sensitivity and communication and the impact of all of these on the educational process. During their international practicum experience, prospective teachers apply these theories and understandings to make sense of and reflect on the challenges and opportunities of teaching abroad. In other words, cultural study (in its broadest sense) should not only be included in the pre-departure courses, but also in the field experience itself, where it is usually eclipsed by lesson plans, teaching methods and discipline strategies (Stachowski, et.al., 2003).

Just as important is a capstone course that would allow prospective teachers to integrate their

foreign experience with previous coursework. Too often, prospective teachers returning from their international experience are left alone to process what they have done and what they feel. They need help to understand what happened in terms of their personal and professional growth, and how their cross-cultural experiences relate to their future teaching in a diverse classroom in the U.S.

It is that future teaching, and, in turn, the future of our children, that is of concern here. It is clear from the numbers that this will be done in a classroom filled with students from diverse backgrounds. It is clear from the research into international teaching that interning abroad creates culturally confident, competent and sensitive world-minded teachers who bring fresh ideas and open minds to their U.S. classrooms.

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