

Home Culture, Host Culture, and Identity: Student Teachers' Understanding of Self and Others

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March 22, 2008

Abstract

This article used data from an ethnographic study to address the unique challenges facing novice teachers in their practice teaching in a cross-cultural context. Participants in the study were 15 student teachers in a U.S. study abroad program in South America. Student teachers' views were sought through a recursive process of review of students' documents, and participant observation of classroom teaching. The data revealed that efficacy as a cultural learner positively interacted with teacher efficacy. Student behavior and classroom management were a concern, but much misbehavior and problems with delivery of instruction were attributed to different cultural values held by the host culture than the home culture. The data also showed that while participants reflected typical trends in study abroad participation, their career paths were significantly different than what might be expected. Few participants pursued international careers, and none immediately began teaching after graduation. Nevertheless, participants highly valued the study abroad experience in general, and in particular, found that student teaching in an international setting increased their efficacy as teachers.

Introduction

Student teaching in an international setting is a relatively rare and new practice, and has a checkered history of results. Whereas foreign language majors have long been encouraged or required to study abroad to hone language skills, they sometimes have also been motivated to do so for teacher training (Kalivoda, 1977; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Historically, less than six percent of pre-service teachers have participated in international activities, and this holds true across all teaching specializations (Inestroza,

1985). This is despite benefits cited by Mahan and Stachowski (1985) that, in addition to teaching skills, participating in student teaching abroad leads teachers to learn about culture; Stauffer (1973) and Roose (2001) found similar results.

How do novice teachers in international settings understand the culture of schooling? In what ways does culture (that of the teacher as visitor and that of student as native) impact the classroom? In addition, whose culture and which curriculum has the greatest impact—that of the foreign teacher or the host culture’s students? International teaching programs shed light on questions related to classroom culture and norms (Fuller and Clarke, 1994). Sussman (2002), focusing on experienced teachers, notes that the impact of the international experience depends greatly on the strength of identity with one’s home culture. Novice teachers are dependent on the host school and the cooperating teacher to provide curriculum and establish culture. Furthermore, studies have shown that student teachers are resistant to change of culture (Tatto, 1996). This report will examine reflection papers of novice teachers as they wrestle with the question of culture.

Views from other studies

Wolfer (1990) states that the resulting global awareness (“global mindedness”) is important enough to require international experiences of all novice teachers as part of their pre-service training, and Young (2001) recommends study abroad for beginning teachers, as pre-service teachers benefit more than their experienced colleagues. Not all studies report positive findings, though. Casale-Giannola (2000) notes that negative experiences abroad can narrow teachers’ perspectives. Also, there is the factor of reverse

culture shock that impacts travel experience as novice teachers re-enter their home culture, diminishing its application to the classroom (Abrams-Reis, 1980; Storti, 2001). Apathy encountered by the returnee can eliminate all benefit of international experience. However, one of Wilson's (1988) suggestions to ameliorate reverse culture shock is to speak to student groups about the international experience—exactly the setting for a pre-service teacher.

The data of the present study was used to delineate the processes by which novice teachers looked at culture and curriculum--both their home culture and curriculum and that of the host school. Further, the discussion will emphasize that that teacher efficacy is influenced by the interaction of both culture and curriculum.

Design of the Study

Sample

This qualitative study focused on one Latin American international internship program, starting in May 2003 until July 2005, which was made up of a sample of fifteen student teachers from a U.S. university who participated in a study abroad experience that included completion of their student teaching requirement for Texas Teacher Certification. All student teachers worked in one of three different international schools, affiliated with the British, American, or Italian school systems. The national schools were not an option due to certain legal restrictions. The choice of three types of institutions limited the influence of cultural borrowing from American schools (Joyce and Showers, 1985). The language of the host country was Spanish, while the language of

instruction in all cases was English. Each participant had to apply for admission into the U.S. teacher education program, and upon completion of coursework, be admitted as a student teacher candidate. Furthermore, students had to be admitted to the study abroad program at the home university. While participating in the experience, students took part in weekly orientation sessions that addressed selected cultural issues of the host country (history, language, religion, and politics). Over the period of each student teacher's semester abroad, there were 12 reflection entries in the journal, a weekly interview of the student teachers by the university supervisor, and a bi-weekly interview with the cooperating teacher. Each group of student teachers created an evaluation report of their experiences to serve as guide to future novice teachers at their school.

Procedures

The study used a series of interviews, university program documents, e-mail communication with pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers, cultural learning journals, classroom observations, formal reports to host schools, final reflection papers and student purpose statements in resumes. To investigate longitudinal results and career paths, e-mail surveys, alumni records, and Internet search engines were used to contact former participants three to five years after participation.

The researcher, a bilingual/bicultural male who served as the university supervisor of the novice teachers, conducted all data collection procedures. While the study revealed several significant aspects of the experience of novice teachers conducting student teaching in a different culture, this study only addressed those findings related to

culture and curriculum. Pseudonyms are used for all participants, organizations, and locations.

Interpretation of data

Field notes of observations and student writings were analyzed using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), by which incidents were examined for similarities that reflect general categories. A general theoretical framework that interpreted and explained the data was discovered by constant comparison of sources. The emerging explanation delimited until a small set of concepts was formulated. This study followed the methods using by Harry (1992), with attention to concerns for reliability and validity from LeCompte and Goetz (1982). The weekly reflection papers or journals of the participants were patterned after the culture-learning journal, used by Berwick and Whalley (2000) to study Canadian students during a visit to Japan. They advocated the use of reflections and journals to measure personal growth, particularly as one encounters a second culture.

This paper was based on the data from weekly journals, student produced reports, supervisor classroom observation notes, and student resumes, focusing on culture and curriculum. These two areas were gradually reduced to the following five themes: student behavior and classroom management, instruction, teacher efficacy, efficacy as a cultural learner, and other models of schools and teacher preparation.

University student teaching program documents, student weekly journals, supervisor notes, and student-produced handbook for future groups supported the theme of student behavior and classroom management. The subject of instruction came

primarily from formal classroom observations, and was supported by student reflection statements. Teacher efficacy was indicated not as much by university documents as by student reflections and resumes. Student belief about efficacy as cultural learners was based on final reflection papers, as well as weekly journals. The theme of other models was supported by supervisor notes, final reflection papers, and weekly journal reports.

One cannot generalize to other populations from the findings based on a small sample (one group of student teachers). However, the frequent nature of the data-collection process and the substantial triangulation of data allowed for an accurate picture of participants' views. It is therefore a sound conclusion that similar dynamics could be expected with similar populations under similar circumstances. Most important, since the study was concerned with the process of interaction between US student teachers in three different international schools, the investigation's findings should be reflected in a larger number of similar cases.

Student behavior and classroom management

In their home culture, as a part of the training program, the student teachers received documents from the university where they were admonished to dress professionally, become familiar with school policies and expectations, and become familiar with teaching techniques and classroom management. Novice teachers were also told to treat students with warmth, firmness, and fairness. In their weekly reflections, student teachers made what might also be considered typical statements as they transformed from observer to teacher (Evans & Tribble, 1986; Veenman, 1984). Jessica observed that "I'm no longer a new teacher to them, so the grace period of good behavior

is over.” Susan said “It’s like I don’t have much authority over them.” Samantha noted that as soon as her Mrs. Johnson (the school’s cooperating teacher) left her alone with the children “...the controls battle began.” Angela summed up the frustration of many first year teachers by remarking that “I felt like I was saying ‘Wait until your father gets home’, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

On the other hand Susan said, “I know I’ll miss my students”. Angela later remarked that her students planned a going away party at the end of her semester experience, but that they were rather playful, rather than vindictive.

Students planned a surprise party for me, but it’s hard for 50 kids to be sneaky...
I learned that when someone moves away, everyone rubs hands on the person’s hair while they say the alphabet (or something like that).

The novice teachers produced a report for future student teachers that made several references to classroom behavior such as “the student body is made up of children from all over the world,” the “classes are less structured than they are in the United States,” “the local children are more affectionate,” and “the teacher-student relationship is less formal than in the United States.” In their opinion, the cooperating teachers did not share a coherent school discipline plan. “Each teacher’s rules are different and you learn to adapt.” The supervisor’s notes from the weekly sessions reflect this: the novice teachers reported “no consequence for misbehavior.” In Susan’s weekly report, she noted that the principal asked her in front of the class how she got along with her cooperating teacher. “When the principal asked me how things were, I could only say nice things as my cooperating teacher was right there.” Communication with cooperating teachers was

also difficult at times: “[t]eachers tend to be blunt and outspoken.” It seems that children receive “very little discipline in the home.”

Nevertheless, the student teachers seemed to view their experience in a positive light, despite some clashes, as they tell future student teachers to “expect to be challenged and blessed as you adapt to a new culture.” Samantha summed it up by saying “communication with children from across the world is an excellent idea from any standpoint.”

Instruction

Awareness of other cultures and appreciating language differences are benefits of international experiences (Young, 2001). However, culture or language played a significant part of student teacher frustration when instruction did not go as planned. Based on the university supervisor’s classroom observations, on several occasions, student teachers were unaware of their use of English acronyms and students’ common Spanish/English interference, such as the use of articles in sentences. Twice in a kindergarten class, students responded correctly in Spanish to novice teacher Kelly’s question posed in English. As no acknowledgement was made of the child’s (accurate) response, the student began to initiate off-task behaviors. Kelly was also charged with developing handwriting skills with first graders, but she was unaware of differences in United States writing styles and those of her host country. Jessica did not realize that Spanish has no “short u” sound, and so failed to take advantage of an opportunity to compare and contrast English to Spanish sounds with a first grade class, and failed to clarify instructions by writing definitions and terms on the board instead of relying on oral language. Samantha, who worked with fifth graders, underscored the relationship of

classroom management and curriculum: “I learned that behavior goes south when students do not understand the content.”

Teacher Efficacy

Ashton (1984) cited eight dimensions of teacher efficacy. The one most closely related to self-efficacy, positive affect, is feeling good about teaching, about self, and about students. Student teachers shared a variety of opinions about their ability as teachers. Nancy confessed “I know at times I came home feeling like a horrible teacher, but I know I wanted to try again and again until I felt comfortable with myself. I think I now have stronger willpower.” Macy reflected, “I catch myself doing things that later I think to myself ‘you could have done that better.’ But, I can’t wait to see what else I will learn next week through this experience.”

Other novice teachers had more confidence. Angela boasted, “I almost was bored by [my own lesson]. It was a nice lesson, and I knew what was going to happen.” Susan resented the help offered from her cooperating teacher: “I didn’t feel like I needed to have the lessons already planned out for me.” When faced with student misbehavior, Angela self-assuredly stated that she knew just what to do: “I chose selective hearing as my weapon.” The student teaching experience made them more confident as they approached the beginning of their careers. Jennifer confessed to resenting a school holiday, but knew that “missing my students during the holiday shows that I will enjoy it when I am there full-time.” After her international student teaching experience, Jessica felt she could teach anywhere: “I had the chance to teach in classrooms that are as culturally diverse as it gets.”

One of the primary factors contributing to their teacher efficacy was self-selection as an international student teacher. Another factor may have been economic motivation. Obviously, wealthier students would better be able to pay for study abroad in addition to student teaching tuition costs, as international student teachers did not have the option for a part-time job. However, the program was promoted as a way to begin to teach early (as it was a summer program), so students could begin their careers a semester early (and possibly begin to repay their college loans sooner).

Interest in international travel or foreign cultures might also have been key in the decision to participate. Student teachers' resumes indicated an openness to other cultures as evidenced by "bettering a community across the world", participating in internships in Germany, traveling to Central America, studying in Spain, Mexico, and South America, working in the International Students office, and tutoring international students in English.

The final major factor was the recruitment process of the university, which came in two stages. First, the college of education determined who could enter the teaching training program, culminating with student teaching. Typically, this required three professors to recommend a college student for education coursework. Then, a Teacher Education Candidate self-assessment had to be completed with a self-analysis of one's "ability to communicate" which ultimately would decide who could participate in student teaching. Student teachers accepted into the study abroad program were carefully screened candidates who had some international experience, with more extensive pre-service observation and school volunteer service than their peers. To be a part of study abroad, students also needed two additional faculty references, a campus life reference

(dean-behavior clearance) and verification of conduct, have financial clearance from the university, and finally, agree to sign a behavior contract. This office also contained some self-analysis on its application form, such as why the student wished to participate, and how it would contribute to their personal development.

Some participants, like Nancy, thought that only a few student teachers should participate in an international experience: “some teachers are easily adaptable to the experience of different cultures and some are not.” Macy, on the other hand, vigorously recommended the experience for all. “I think every student teacher should broaden their horizon by experiencing a culture besides their own.”

Cultural Learner Efficacy

According to Cross (1998), teachers who returned from an international teaching experience rated themselves high in self-efficacy and as cultural learners. Participants in the present study had similar positive views of themselves due to their participation in an international experience. In their summary reports, student teachers said, “we gained knowledge and understanding of children from different cultures and backgrounds. We were challenged and blessed as we adapted to the children, schools, and families from another way of life.” Kelly stated “feeling successful being a teacher to students who have a language barrier with you is an amazing experience. You can’t trade that for anything.” Nancy reported, “I got practical ESL experience and that is priceless.” Macy maintained that “many good things I learned about handling differences in culture and environment, the habits and rules of school... these things I could not have learned

anywhere else.” Susan remarked, “with the help of other student teachers...we branched out and adapted to the new culture around us.”

Some of the confidence was related to teaching and other cultures, but part of the new found confidence was related to travel in general. Samantha wrote in her reflection journal “I am prepared to travel to another country on my own. I have more confidence in myself...I can make it through anything.” Angela said “I am now more open-minded about my own culture and how it affects others around us from other countries. I’ve gained knowledge of how the world sees the United States.”

Other models of schools and student teaching

Young (2001) links study abroad with an appreciation for the host culture’s school system as well as understanding of immigrants in one’s home culture. Student teachers in this study abroad program learned how local novice teachers began their practice teaching. Susan was able to visit with local student teachers, and observe a class session. She was surprised that locals “had critique time where the other student teachers in their group would give them feedback the same day...it was exciting to get to sit in on that experience.” Macy was overwhelmed at times because as a novice teacher, she would “learn so many new things being in a new culture.” In the report to the school, student teachers were grateful that their “horizons broadened because of contact with students from a different culture.” They felt privileged to observe how host country students could “maintain a balance between multiple languages and cultures.” One of the reasons the international schools were amenable to receiving international student teachers was that such novice teachers were “resources of cultural learning,” and

exposed to “different cultural perspectives.” In the summary report, the student teachers said that they “...gained knowledge and understanding of children from different cultures and backgrounds. We were challenged and blessed as we adapted to the children, schools, and families from another way of life.” Jessica stated that “school works in an entirely different way, with completely different habits and routines, but the focus is the same: to encourage children to enjoy learning and that what they learn they can really use.”

Not all of the models were positive. The supervisor noted in the classroom observation that there was a systemic bias against evaluation of local teachers, due to three factors: the influence of socialism and role of the State which results in a non-merit based system, the cultural emphasis placed on equality (everyone is the same, as opposed to individuality), and the desire to leave a good impression. Samantha almost gave up, concluding, “Not all children are going to learn at the same rate.” Angela felt that “there appeared to be a secret teacher’s checklist,” so children never knew how they were to be evaluated. However, all of the participants echoed Jessica’s sentiment that “I know that I learned and was exposed to many things that I would not have been had I stayed at home for student teaching.”

Discussion and Synthesis

As might be expected, participants in student teaching abroad shared characteristics of both student teachers and study abroad participants. Fourteen of the fifteen participants were female (93%), but this majority reflected both the trend in Texas student teachers (78%; Texas State Board of Education, 2004) and U.S. participants in study abroad (65%; Dwyers and Peters, 2004; Handell, 2007). The fifteen were from 256

education majors who participated in student teaching at their institution, which matched the national average of six percent of all majors participating in study abroad (Inestroza, 1985). Despite the fact that all novice teachers were only twenty-one or twenty-two years old, forty percent of the participants had some type of international experience before this study abroad—an internship, overseas language school studies, a mission trip, or participation in a previous study abroad program.

The two areas that were first used to analyze the data, curriculum and culture, were gradually reduced to five themes: student behavior and classroom management, instruction, teacher efficacy, efficacy as a cultural learner, and other models of schools and teacher preparation. As did their counterparts, student teachers abroad struggled with classroom management in their changing role from observer to teacher. However, participants saw some misbehavior as tolerated by the host culture, and reinforced by perceived lack of consistent school rules and the independent spirits of the cooperating teachers. Also, student teachers would have elicited more on-task behavior from children with a better mastery of the language. On several occasions, positive contributions to the class were ignored due to the student teacher's lack of language ability of the host country. Participants reveled in the diversity of their classes, and thought that their study abroad experience would enable them to teach any student upon their return to their home culture, particularly English language learners. They also believed that due to their student teaching experience, their cross-cultural experiences, or both, they were now prepared for anything. Despite occasional misgivings indicated in the data, the student teachers attributed high teacher efficacy to themselves and high efficacy as cultural learners. However, self-selection, as a participant in both the study abroad program and

the student teaching overseas experience may have eliminated those with lower self-efficacy.

Should student teachers study abroad?

Of particular interest to university study abroad programs are the career paths of their graduates. Is there a particular benefit (high retention as a teacher, more international experience), so that programs should specifically recruit student teachers for international practice teaching experiences? Specifically, does student teaching abroad influence career decisions? Do they have more internationally oriented jobs than their counterparts who do their student teaching in their home culture? To investigate longitudinal results and career paths, an e-mail survey was conducted, alumni records were utilized, and Internet searches were made to contact former participants. Those who responded often gave information about others. However, sample mortality was a severe problem, as five of the fifteen participants did not respond to follow-up surveys. (To counterbalance this defect, the data analysis coded non-respondents as negative responses to careers in education and international careers.)

Of 15 student teachers, none began to teach immediately after the student teaching experience, although this was an express goal of the program, as they were able to do their student teaching during the US school holiday-June-August, while classes were in session in South America. However, within the five years since graduation, 67 % of participants worked in education (K-university). This might be comparable to the rate of their peers--the retention rate calculated for novice Texas teachers varies. One source put it at 63% (Mentoring Leadership and Research Network, 2008) while another rated it as high as 81% for the first year, but decreasing to 50% after five years (Zavala, 2005).

Dwyers and Peters (2004) stated that nearly half of study abroad participants go into international careers. In this study, however, only three of the fifteen participants had “international careers”; one lived in a foreign country married to a foreign national, one taught at an international school in Chile, and one worked in a U.S. study abroad office.

Conclusion

This qualitative study focused on one student teaching program in South America from May 2003 to July 2005, where fifteen U.S. student teachers worked in American, British, and Italian international schools. Data included student weekly reflections, formal reports to host schools, final reflection papers, and student purpose statements. Three main elements distinguished the international student teacher experience from the training typical of Texas education majors: recruitment, placement, and the cultural awareness program. Student teachers were recruited in a different way for the study abroad teaching experience: they were carefully screened candidates who had some international experience, with more extensive pre-service observation and school volunteer service than their peers. Second, novice teachers were placed in international schools rather than national schools due to language and legal restrictions. Thus, student teachers were exposed to a variety of teaching methods and learning expectations. Finally, student teachers were taught the language, history and culture of the host country through selected readings, field trips, reflection papers, and informal activities. There was a concentrated effort to integrate the novice teacher’s cultural learning with the practice of teaching.

Using recursive data analysis of student documents five themes emerged: student behavior and classroom management, instruction, teacher efficacy, efficacy as a cultural learner, and other models of schools and teacher preparation. Student teachers viewed their international experience as increasing their efficacy, both as teachers and cultural learners. The data indicates that there may be career path differences for student teachers that study abroad that diverge significantly from both other students who study abroad, and also from their counterparts who do student teaching in their home cultures. Two future research questions are: first, how does international student teaching impact length of service compared to traditional student teachers? Second, is there a delay in beginning teaching careers for those with international experience?

Despite barriers to transference (such as culture shock and reentry difficulties), student teachers can convert their international experience into good classroom practice as did Mr. Appleby, an exemplary teacher cited in Dillon (1989) who, because of his training abroad, created “social organization in his classroom that accounted for the backgrounds” of his students and “within his organization provided meaningful experiences for low-track remedial readers/writers,” empowering them to succeed (p. 289). This example of drawing upon international teaching experience shows that student teaching abroad can have a dramatic impact on U.S. students.

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