

“OPENING MINDS”: THE IMPACT OF A CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY IMMERSIVE TEACHING EXPERIENCE FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

Being an effective educator within culturally and linguistically diverse schools means having a rich understanding and broad perspective on attending to students from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Historically, students from such backgrounds, and the ways in which to leverage their cultural identities and linguistic strengths, were not considered in teacher education programs as pre-service teachers learned to create learning experiences. Some pre-service teachers from more rural and remote communities have limited experiences to understand how to support students from diverse backgrounds as they come from more homogeneous communities. However, students in pre-service teachers' future classrooms will speak multiple languages, whose first language is not the same as the nation's official language, and the parents of these students could potentially have different cultural norms than the pre-service teacher. This means learning that the intersection of school, community, and families from different cultural perspectives is an important aspect in preparing pre-service teachers for the reality of teaching in a more global society. Thus, the purpose of this project was to provide unique and highly applicable experiences to learn first-hand about teaching all students from culturally and linguistically rich backgrounds as this will better prepare them for teaching careers.

Keywords: *Pre-service teachers, cultural competency, international teaching.*

1. Introduction

Teaching is a complex endeavor that requires educators to possess both content and pedagogical knowledge to be effective. Part of this pedagogical knowledge is an understanding of the role students' culture plays in the classrooms (Berns, 2015). These cultural aspects include such things as their attitudes, beliefs, language, faith, and customs. Given the diversity of classrooms globally, it is important that pre-service teachers have cross-cultural experiences to help them prepare for the reality of teaching, to perceive and value cultural diversity in a more positive and strengths-based way and to view peoples of other cultures without stereotyping (Cushner, 2007). This means that teacher preparation programs, and the schools that host pre-service teachers for field-based practicum experiences, have a substantial role in helping pre-service teachers understand these complexities. However, many pre-service teachers have limited experiences working with students from cultures other than their own or in supporting students whose home language is different than that of the primary language spoken in school. This means these pre-service teachers are potentially at a disadvantage when they step into their own classrooms as the teacher of record and need to work with students whose language and culture do not match their own. However, when they are immersed in a different culture, they can develop important skills such as global competency, intercultural sensitivity, and foreign language abilities and pedagogies (Rahatzad, et al., 2013). Thus, the purpose of this project was to better understand how a culturally immersive field experience promotes intercultural learning and competence, confidence in their teaching in different contexts, as well as pre-service teachers' personal growth.

1.1. Teacher preparation programs

Traditional teacher preparation programs often include some, albeit sometimes limited, opportunities for pre-service teachers to work with K-12 students and to gain experience with designing and delivering instruction as well as assessing learning. Field experiences continue to be one of the most effective strategies for increasing pre-service teachers' effectiveness (Education Commission of the

States, 2003) but they often occur during the final stages of their training and only in select schools or contexts. Because of this, pre-service teachers have limited opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the interplay between teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. As early as 1995, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recognized the importance of these culturally rich experiences and mandated teacher education programs to provide global and international education (NCATE, 1995). This means that teacher preparation programs have an obligation to the profession, to pre-service teachers and to communities to ensure that teachers have the academic and cultural competencies to support all children (Ladson-Billings, 2016). In fact, by under-preparing pre-service teachers for teaching within culturally diverse contexts, negative stereotypes around race, culture and poverty can be reinforced (Santoro, 2014). This further highlights the importance of culturally immersive field-based work.

Furthermore, field experiences create opportunities to develop practices and dispositions that substantially impact teacher effectiveness. For example, field experiences allow pre-service teachers to apply theory in real settings (Bartolome, 2017) and understand the nuances of complex practices such as facilitating whole-class discussions, responsibly attending to classroom management incidents and reinforcing classroom norms. All of these complex teacher actions require opportunities to practice, rehearse, or otherwise try out complex teaching practices in authentic situations (Lampert et al., 2023). Likewise, field experiences help shape pre-service teachers' identity, confidence and self-efficacy (Ateşkan, 2016) all of which impact their effectiveness as teachers.

1.2. Building cultural awareness and competence

When pre-service teachers have opportunities to directly interact with people who are culturally different within real-life settings, it can promote self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. When such experiences are combined with classroom instruction, pre-service teachers develop a more robust understanding of culture and the role it plays in teaching and learning (Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012). However, this awareness of culture, and the role teachers have in creating meaningful interactions and shared cultural discussions, means that pre-service teachers have had experiences where they reflect and think about their own beliefs, values, biases and judgements within an unfamiliar context (Santoro, 2014). As they critically analyze their own culture as well as become aware of how human differences are used by people in power to rationalize inequality and maintain their position of authority in society, they are better able to see students as individuals, coming from different contexts and situations (Smolcic & Katunich, 2013). They then can see that a one-size-fits all method of teaching is potentially ineffective, and come to see that a student centered approach to teaching is necessary.

Teachers' intercultural competence is necessary to teach all students effectively, as teachers must recognize that culture shapes how individuals see themselves and the world around them. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to understand other people across cultural barriers and includes the attitudes, knowledge and skills required to function effectively with those from cultures different from our own (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). One way teacher education programs can build cultural awareness and intercultural competency is through immersive field experiences in schools with students from different cultures. In doing so, pre-service teachers have opportunities to interact with other people and to learn about other ways of thinking and being (James, 2008). Given the cultural differences often found between teachers and their students (King & Butler, 2015), such interactions become increasingly more important prior to end-of-program, field-based experiences. In addition to an increased intercultural competency, Willard-Holt (2001) found that even in short-term international experiences, participants develop greater global awareness, flexibility and reflectivity in teaching along with a heightened sense of professionalism in collaborating with colleagues and teaching students in other countries. Such professional dispositions are also the hallmark of effective teachers.

Essentially, field-based work in teacher preparation, when viewed through the lens of diversity in culture and language, is essential for developing culturally responsive skills, fostering cultural competence, and preparing future teachers to navigate the complexities of diverse classrooms. As such, the purpose of this project was to better understand how a culturally immersive field experience promotes intercultural learning and competence, confidence in their teaching in different contexts, as well as pre-service teachers' personal growth.

2. Design

This study, which is part of a larger study, used a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2020) as it allowed for interpretations of participants' perceived experiences and allowed for the development of understandings based on multiple qualitative data sources as well as descriptive statistics. While this project is in its second year, the data and findings in this paper are only from the first year of the project and are only based on some of the qualitative data.

2.1. Methodology

The broader study used a mixed methods approach, and included data from field notes, observations, daily reflections with open-ended questions and the Likert scale type questionnaires, interviews, and post experience reflections. However, for the purpose of this paper, only the field notes and post experience reflections will be discussed. As such, emphasis was placed on the interpretations and meanings that the researchers had towards developing intercultural learning and competence from these qualitative data in order to identify key themes (Patton, 2002).

2.2. Participants and setting

Participants included 11 pre-service teachers attending a university in a more rural and mountainous region of the United States. Of these 11 participants, nine of them were focusing in primary education and two were focusing in secondary education. Additionally, only four of the eleven participants had traveled outside of North America though three others had been to Mexico. Participants varied in their progress of completing their program; two had only one year remaining while the other nine had between two and three years remaining. Additionally, only one participant fluently spoke the language of the host nation, which is Spanish.

The host school, the American Island School (AIS), is a private American curriculum school located in the Caribbean and includes students from pre-kindergarten through grade twelve with nearly ninety-eight percent of graduates going on to pursue a post-secondary degree. Approximately 60% of students are citizens of the nation with the other 40% representing nationalities from 31 other countries. While English is the primary language of instruction at the school, nearly 70% of all students are English Language Learners. Participants were placed with one cooperating teacher and were asked to support the teacher throughout the day. By the end of the week, participants were supporting the teacher of record by teaching multiple-mini lessons or an entire class period.

While the majority of the time was spent at AIS experiencing what it means to teach within an internationally diverse context, participants also had opportunities to independently engage with the community. This often meant going out for meals together, but without university faculty, visiting cultural heritage attractions or museums, or visiting markets to make purchases. During these times, participants were faced with interacting with locals and trying to communicate their needs or wishes despite not being fluent in the local language. This allowed for participants to further consider the intersection of families and communities within the broader school community.

2.3. Limitations

As with all qualitative studies, the findings from this study are not broadly generalizable. It is left to others to determine the extent to which this study aligns with other cases or contexts. However, given the increase in cultural and linguistic diversity of students in schools globally, it is possible that understandings from this study may be applied to other relevant or similar contexts wherein further insights can be developed (Patton, 2002).

3. Findings

The findings are based on the field notes, daily, and post experience reflections. From the analysis of this data, several themes emerged but for the sake of this paper, only two of the more prominent themes are shared. These two themes focus on a personal change with respect to identity, self or professional purpose and an awareness of culture in teaching and in learning.

3.1. Change in identity, self and professional purpose

The first major theme is in relation to participants' perceived change with respect to their purpose in the profession or in how they perceived themselves. Collectively, participants wrote about this experience as being a major transformative process that had an impact on them in one of these ways; it was reported often as a "life changing" experience. Many also wrote about a new found joy for teaching. "There is a fire in my heart once again for teaching," and they came away "with a new outlook and renewed passion for teaching" wrote two participants. This suggests that even short-term immersive experiences can impact pre-service teachers' views of teaching.

Others recognized a substantial change in their own identity or shift in their own self-confidence. One participant stated they came back "no longer quiet and small, but confident." Whereas another wrote that "when I got off the plane, I was not the same person who got on the plane a week prior." Others indicated they were surprised with themselves because they were in new situations and had to adapt to these situations, which took a kind of courage that they did not know they had. "I just had to jump in,

[I] have to be brave.” These reflections indicate that personal growth, confidence, and nuances in identity can also be developed and strengthened within intense and immersive field-based experiences.

Others discussed more subtle, and perhaps a more profound understanding about commonalities across cultures. One participant reflected on an evening sitting in the plaza watching families interact and the children at play and how this reminded them of a greater connection regardless of culture and language.

“As I watched these people living their lives and enjoying an evening with family and friends, I was struck with gratitude for this opportunity. I had spent an entire week getting to know the people. I attended their school, ate their food, tried to speak their language, and learned about their history, music, and dance. This significant moment at the plaza was a point of reflection and understanding about what it means to be human.”

Collectively, this immersive experience impacted each participant's sense of self, identity and their personal purpose, which were not inherently a focus of the project.

3.2. Cultural awareness in teaching and learning

The second major theme centered on a cultural awareness, specifically in aspects of teaching and learning that they did not previously have or did not fully appreciate prior to the experience. While this immersive experience was only one week long, it seems to have been enough for them to understand the important role community, culture and language play in teaching and learning. One participant wrote “I learned what it was like to feel like an outsider and to be in the minority” whereas another reflected that “I will hopefully be able to help students of diverse backgrounds feel accepted, loved, and welcome because I know better what it’s like to be in a new place and to stick out.” This awareness of cultural diversity and individual differences is something that can be included in coursework but can be difficult to fully process without experiencing it firsthand.

Some developed a more practical understanding of how culture and language impact learning. One participant elaborated on this when they wrote “our culture is what drives us. This culture also [gives] students a sense of identity and purpose. For this reason, it is my profound belief that a child’s culture should be embraced in the classroom.” Others pointed out how being able to speak to all students was something they had taken for granted. “I now understand what it is like to be in a school setting where the language that is spoken is not your native language,” which was something they had not previously experienced. Others wrote about how they began to understand what it meant to create a successful learning environment for English Language Learners because they were able to have discussions with teachers about specific interventions and then immediately try these interventions with students. “I saw a struggling student learn a new skill and saw the happiness he felt when he knew he could do it.” This pre-service teacher went on to state “this is what I want to be able to do for all my students when I become a professional educator.”

Likewise, participants were able to also see that along with cultural differences, there can be cultural similarities even when there are appearances of differences. “These people were just like the people I interact with on a daily basis at home. I could see the light of humanity in their eyes. As different as everything felt, it also felt much the same.” And as simple as it may sound, several talked about how they began to realize that despite where children live, what they wear, or what language they speak, they share many things in common; “No matter where you go, kids are kids.” From this shift in perspective that “even though we are all different, we are more similar than we realize,” participants recognized that their role as a teacher remains the same regardless of a child’s culture or language.

4. Discussion

All pre-service teachers, without exception, reported the trip had impacted them in a powerful way, and that they had experienced significant personal and/or professional changes. Culturally immersive experiences empower pre-service teachers to apply the theoretical knowledge they gained from coursework in authentic educational settings to better understand the interplay between theory practice. This seems to also be the case with respect to culturally responsive teaching. And while traditional teacher preparation programs are often designed to balance theory and practice, some teaching attitudes, beliefs, and skills may be challenging to learn without a more immersive experience wherein pre-service teachers and students can learn from each other (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Likewise, complex topics, such as culturally responsive teaching, require experiences in which one is not from the dominant culture but these experiences need not be semester-long study abroad experiences (Jones & Bond, 2019);

short-term immersive experiences can also impact one's cultural awareness. Shorter trips can also be beneficial since they can increase the number of pre-service teachers who can participate. Likewise, participating pre-service teachers can also share their learning with their peers back home which may lead to an even further reaching, and rippling effect on the global education of many future students.

5. Conclusion

One aspect of effective teaching includes being culturally responsive and possessing a cultural competence to support all students. For some pre-service teachers, their limited experiences working with students from culturally, linguistically or ethnically diverse settings means they have ways of thinking about teaching and learning that are underdeveloped. When teacher preparation programs and the schools where pre-service teachers are placed for field-based practicum do not work to address these deficiencies, pre-service teachers are then at a potential disadvantage. With the shift in student demographics changing in schools across the globe, the need to prepare pre-service teachers for different kinds of diversity becomes even more important. This study showcases the impact that even small, immersive opportunities can have on pre-service teachers' cultural competencies, empathy, and awareness of students' cultural and linguistic strengths. And as such, the potential to "open minds" to the possibilities of culturally responsive teaching takes root.

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