

CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING AS CATALYST: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF TEACHER GROWTH IN BELIZE

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Abstract

This paper describes a federally funded, faculty-led study abroad program for undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a rural U.S. university-based teacher preparation program. Set in San Ignacio, Belize, the initiative was designed to foreground immersive learning opportunities and facilitate cross-cultural mentor-mentee relationships. Over 10 days, travelers engaged in local school visits and cultural activities, fostering a layered mentoring relationship among undergraduate teacher candidates, graduate students, and local Belizean educators. Using phenomenological research methods (Moustakas, 1994), this study analyzes qualitative data from focus group interviews, written reflections, and capstone projects to illuminate the pivotal learning moments that scaffolded students' professional development. The findings reveal the motivations and behaviors of travelers navigating a multicultural context, suggesting that this layered mentoring model serves as a transformative framework for study abroad programs aiming to prepare teachers for increasingly diverse classroom environments.

Keywords: *Study abroad, teacher education, mentorship, phenomenological research.*

1. Introduction

The racialized tensions that the current U.S. president has unleashed on a local and global scale sit in direct opposition to (teacher) educators' work of creating racially and culturally inclusive learning environments. This juxtaposition makes it even more challenging to prepare undergraduate and graduate students with the practices and dispositions to teach in equitable and culturally-relevant ways in a predominantly monolingual and monocultural rural context. Data provided by the Michigan Department of Education reports an ongoing trend that pre-dates the current administration: graduates from our rural-serving, four-year, university-based teacher preparation program feel underprepared to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

While challenging in a predominantly monolingual and monocultural rural context, we must address this concern given the increasingly diverse U.S. student population. The national increase in the percentage of public school students identified as Language Learners (i.e., their heritage language is not English), for example, in 2019 compared with 2010, was higher in 42 states, including Michigan (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In this paper, we describe a U.S. federally-funded grant that supported an inaugural faculty-led study abroad program for teacher candidates at our university. We explore how the study abroad program was designed to (1) intentionally foreground immersive learning opportunities within the host country, and (2) facilitate cross-cultural, mentor-mentee relationships among (emerging) educators.

1.1. University context

The university where we taught at the time of the faculty-led study abroad program, Northern Michigan University (NMU), is a rural, four-year, state college in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP) in the midwestern region of the United States. With an enrollment of 6,611 undergraduate students, 86% of NMU students receive financial aid, 35% are first-generation, and many transfer from two-year community colleges where they earn an associate degree. Nearly 85% of NMU's students are white, reflecting faculty demographics and the nation's teaching profession. Approximately 4% of NMU students participate in study abroad programs annually. While education is a popular program at NMU, with one of the highest enrollment rates on campus, the School of Education, Leadership, & Public Service (SELPS) had never

offered a faculty-led study abroad program. As a rural-serving teacher education program, SELPS aims to prepare social-justice-oriented teachers with the dispositions and practices for teaching within a global society. GlobalUP facilitated a cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional study-abroad effort.

1.2. GlobalUP initiative

Knowing that college students from rural areas generally have less access to international travel, we designed GlobalUP, a 10-day faculty-led study abroad program in San Ignacio, Belize, to increase our undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates’ access to global education. The design of GlobalUP was informed by the growing body of research that emphasizes the necessity of preparing teachers who are not only culturally competent but also globally engaged. As explored in *At School in the World: Developing Globally Engaged Teachers* (Ullom & Guler, 2023), the development of such educators requires intentional, immersive experiences that challenge existing biases and promote a deep understanding of global interconnectedness.

By partnering with a local preschool and primary school within the Cayo District, the undergraduate and graduate students immersed themselves in diverse cultural and linguistic education spaces, creating an opportunity for our students to develop culturally relevant (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and equitable teaching practices. These spaces included an early childhood preschool and primary school where the university students spent three days engaging in classroom observations, conversing with classroom teachers and the principal, and noting the presence and use of learning materials and resources within the classroom setting. Additionally, in the classrooms, the university students facilitated small- and whole-group instruction, including leading educational games, interactive read-alouds, and collaborative classroom projects. Moving beyond the classroom, university students worked alongside Belizean preschool and primary students on service projects to remove refuse from the school grounds and the immediate community.

2. Research design

To understand the impact of this new approach, we employed phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) research methods, which involved conducting focus group interviews with the undergraduate and graduate students who participated in GlobalUP to illuminate their perspective on their experiences, revealing their motivations and behaviors (Lester, 1999), their takeaways and transformations. Phenomenological research stems from the researchers’ interest in and curiosity about a topic they relate to (Moustakas, 1994). Leaning on our curiosity about our students' lived experiences while in Belize and our desire to capture these experiences to better understand the program outcomes, we asked: *What aspects of a faculty-led study abroad program in a rural teacher preparation program do graduate and undergraduate students identify as transformational to their teaching practices?*

2.1. Participants

Table 1. GlobalUP Participants, by Teacher Preparation Program.

Degree	Program	Number of Travelers
Bachelors	Elementary Education	3
Bachelors	Secondary Mathematics	1
Bachelors	K-12 Special Education	1
Masters	Early Childhood	4
Masters	Educational Administration	1
Masters	Reading Specialist	4
Faculty	Initial Teacher Preparation (Undergraduate)	2
Faculty	Educational Administration (Graduate)	1

In 2025, 17 people participated in GlobalUP, including three faculty members, five undergraduate students, and nine graduate students. Table 1 provides travelers' programs of study. While all five undergraduate students were pursuing initial teacher certification, in most cases, the graduate students were already certified educators, working within early childhood or primary schools across the state. The graduate students' years of experience in the field added a rich layer of mentorship to the program for the undergraduate students, a phenomenon we will discuss later in the manuscript.

2.2. Data sources

We drew on qualitative data sources to better understand GlobalUP's impact on the undergraduate and graduate students and their continued professional development. While in Belize, the undergraduate teacher candidates responded to several open-ended reflection prompts using Padlet, and graduate students were asked to create and present a capstone project on a topic of their choosing, but connected with their academic and professional growth goals. Capstone topics included culturally-relevant leadership, multi-tiered systems of support, and linguistic diversity in culturally-sustaining classrooms. Approximately one month after returning to the United States, we invited all of the travelers to participate in small-group, semi-structured focus group discussions via Zoom. Six of the 13 teachers opted into the conversations. By asking open-ended questions, we allowed "participants to create responses within their cultural and social experiences instead of the researcher's experiences" (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 396).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a multi-phased thematic approach to identify and refine emergent patterns across the qualitative data sets. The process began with the verbatim transcription of focus group recordings, serving as an initial phase of data immersion. During this stage, preliminary key takeaways and significant statements were identified, aligning with the "horizontalization" process described by Moustakas (1994). Following transcription, we employed thematic coding strategies to read across the collective data—including interviews, written reflections, and capstone projects. This iterative process involved open coding to categorize raw data, followed by axial coding to establish connections between themes. By synthesizing these perspectives, the analysis moved from individual descriptions to a collective essence of the participants' experiences. This rigorous cross-comparison ensured that the two resulting themes, which include comparative pedagogies and a layered-mentoring model, accurately represented the transformative growth and reciprocal relationships developed through GlobalUP.

3. Discussion

In keeping with other similar international teaching experiences (Howard, 2023; Shonia & Stachowski, 2014), GlobalUP's immersive nature fostered undergraduate and graduate students' learning in a way that a traditional foundational education course could not. As one graduate student noted, being physically present in the Belizean schools allowed candidates to better understand the intersectionality of education and culture. The program wasn't just about "seeing" a new place, but about immersing oneself within the school community and participating in the daily rhythm of the early childhood and primary schools, which provided a "culture shock" that ultimately became a core part of travelers' professional development. The focus group conversations, as well as the graduate students' capstone projects and undergraduate students' final reflections, referenced shifts in their perspectives and increased social and emotional intelligence, attributed to participants' engagement in comparative pedagogies.

3.1. Comparative pedagogies

The graduate and undergraduate students met with educational leaders; conducted focused observations, interviews with Belizean educators, and resource inventories; facilitated small- and whole-group instruction; and participated in community-service projects within an early childhood center and a primary school over a series of four days. These experiences allowed candidates to explore, observe, practice, and identify best practices and dispositions universal to the profession. As one candidate explained, "I think I grew the most as a future educator by seeing how they do things differently. It challenged my ideas of what a classroom 'should' look like and made me think about what is actually important for the kids" (Sarah, a graduate student). As a future educator, Rebecca, one of the undergraduate students, identified meaningful connections as a universal best practice, noting that her Belizean mentor prioritized relationships with her students at the primary school. Alex, a graduate student in the reading specialist program and recent graduate of the university's undergraduate program, explained, "Even though we didn't always speak the same way, we found other ways to connect. We sat on the floor, we sang songs, we played. It showed me that teaching is so much more than just talking at kids. It's about being with them."

Notably, teacher adaptability and resilience are two cross-cultural dispositions that travelers mentioned in their capstone projects and written reflections. Candidates reflected on their own overreliance on technology and other material resources after observing the Belizean teachers naturally pivot when the power went out. As Sarah recalled, “Nobody blinked an eye;” the teacher remained calm and simply adapted her lesson. During the focus group discussion, Sarah shared that she continued to reflect on that moment and her own resilience as an educator. Wondering if she could be as adaptable as her Belizean mentor teacher, Sarah explained, “It made me realize that I don’t need all the bells and whistles to be a good teacher.”

3.2. Layered-mentoring model

One of the most unexpected yet impactful happenings in the Belizean classroom setting was the layered mentoring between the graduate and undergraduate students. The two student groups were traveling and participating in the study abroad together, but enrolled in different courses. The course objectives and learning outcomes differed, yet through a shared school and classroom space and common study abroad experience, growth and understanding beyond the course objectives emerged. As the challenges of being in an unfamiliar space surfaced, the two groups began to form organic mentor-mentee relationships, creating a new space for both groups to grow their understanding, practice, and pedagogy. The reciprocal relationship perpetuated learning for both groups.

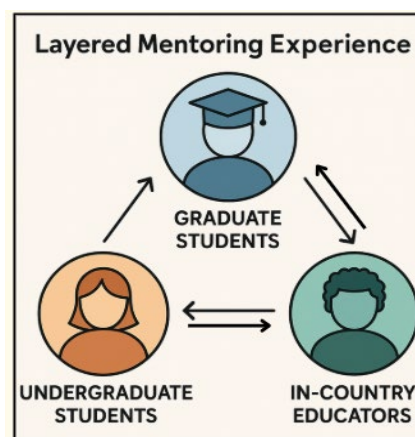
Leaning on their professional training and experience, the graduate students modeled teaching practices and quickly recognized that they were not only teaching the Belizean students, but the undergraduates were also learning in the shared classroom space. Lucy, a graduate student in the reading specialist program and elementary educator, shared in a focus group conversation:

It created a dynamic we wouldn’t normally experience and encouraged us to do things we might not have otherwise done together...I think it benefited the undergraduates to have grad students there to talk with—almost like an informal mentor–mentee relationship. It wasn’t official, but that vibe definitely emerged at times. We were open to those conversations and tried to keep them nonjudgmental, which I think made it successful.

Tammy, another graduate student, added, “To echo that, undergraduates got to spend time with people who were already in the field. We work in education, so they could talk with people who were living out what they might want to do in the future. That was phenomenal.” The graduate students, all of whom were experienced practicing teachers, began to recognize the needs of the less experienced undergraduates and worked to purposefully model practices and create a comfortable space for the undergraduates to begin engaging with the Belizean students. With the support of the graduate students, the undergrads found places within the classroom where they, too, could engage with students and practice their teaching pedagogy.

Extending the learning space further, additional reciprocal mentoring relationships developed as the undergraduates and graduates engaged with the Belizean classroom teachers. This triad of educators, undergraduate students, graduate students, and practicing Belizean (see Figure 1) teachers moved about the classrooms, actively assisting and supporting one another. In doing so, they created opportunities to explore, observe, practice, and identify best practices and dispositions universal to the profession. Recognizing this phenomenon, Rebecca shared, “Seeing how the teachers interacted with the kids... was really a highlight for me. Because we are, I mean, I’m an undergrad, but we have teachers that have been teaching for however long... to see all of us together in one big group, learning from the Belizean teachers and each other, was really cool.”

Figure 1. Layered Mentoring Experience.



This layered-mentoring model ultimately shifted the study abroad experience from a standard clinical placement into a multi-directional community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By dissolving the traditional boundaries between student and teacher, the program fostered a unique space where professional knowledge and practice flowed freely among undergraduates, graduate mentors, and Belizean teachers. This not only accelerated the teacher candidates' pedagogical growth but also revealed a fundamental truth of the profession: that global education is most effective when it is a collaborative, reciprocal journey. Through this triad of mentorship, participants emerged as more reflective, adaptable, and globally-minded practitioners prepared for the complexities of the classroom.

4. Conclusions

The GlobalUP program illustrates the profound impact of intentional, immersive study abroad experiences on teacher growth and development. By bridging the gap between theory and practice through cross-cultural mentorship, undergraduate and graduate students moved beyond their preconceived notions of culture and pedagogy. As one traveler noted during the focus group conversation, "It was definitely out of my comfort zone, but that's where the most learning happened. I feel like I'm coming back with a much broader perspective on the world and on my future career."

This shift from discomfort to professional clarity underscores the value of immersive multicultural learning environments. However, the success of this model suggests several avenues for future study. We aim to investigate the longitudinal impact of such programs on participants' actual classroom practices. Ultimately, this study serves as a call to prioritize ethical, mutually beneficial engagement in international teacher education to better prepare educators for an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

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