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BORDER CROSSING: THE IMPACT OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES ON TEACHER CANDIDATES'. VIEW OF MULTICULTURALISM IN THE CLASSROOM

FRENTE A LA FRONTERA: EL IMPACTO DE LAS EXPERIENCIAS CULTURALES EN LOS CANDIDATOS A DOCENTES. VISTA DEL MULTICULTURALISMO EN EL AULA

Ed. D. Jackie Greene¹

E-mail: jgreene@fgcu.edu

Ph. D. Elia Vázquez-Montilla¹

E-mail: evazquez@fgcu.edu

¹ Florida Gulf Coast University. United States of America.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore short-term cross cultural experiences in which undergraduate teacher candidates attending a Southwest Florida higher education institution are challenged to reflect on educational and social justice issues impacting culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) populations. One experience occurs during the initial semester of the program and one, as a culminating experience, during their last semester. Initially, teacher candidates engage in research to explore the socio-cultural and the educational environment of a CLD student and family. In the final culminating experience, teacher candidates have the opportunity to travel, live and teach in another country incorporating their learned pedagogical practices into the curriculum of another culture. Using data and voices of teacher candidates, this paper will report on the impact of these experiences on both candidates and their professors. Results chronicle the power of cross-cultural experiences to challenge long-held beliefs about “the other”, help teacher candidates recognize the cognitive and affective changes involved in the cross-cultural experience, and to support candidates' development of intercultural knowledge.

Keywords:

Cross-cultural experiences, teacher candidates, sociocultural relationships.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explorará las experiencias interculturales a corto plazo en las que los candidatos de maestros de pregrado que asisten a una institución de educación superior de Southwest Florida tienen el desafío de reflexionar sobre temas educativos y de justicia social que afectan a poblaciones culturalmente y lingüísticamente diversas (CLD). Una experiencia ocurre durante el semestre inicial del programa y una, como una experiencia culminante, durante su último semestre. Inicialmente, los candidatos a docentes se dedican a la investigación para explorar el ambiente socio-cultural y educativo de un estudiante y familia de CLD. En la última experiencia culminante, los profesores candidatos tienen la oportunidad de viajar, vivir y enseñar en otro país incorporando sus prácticas pedagógicas aprendidas en el currículo de otra cultura. Utilizando los datos y las voces de los candidatos a los profesores, este documento informará sobre el impacto de estas experiencias en los candidatos y sus profesores. Los resultados ponen de relieve el poder de las experiencias interculturales para desafiar las creencias de largo plazo sobre “el otro”, ayudar a los candidatos a docentes a reconocer los cambios cognitivos y afectivos involucrados en la experiencia intercultural y apoyar el desarrollo de los candidatos de conocimiento intercultural.

Palabras clave:

Experiencias interculturales, candidatos a docentes, relaciones socioculturales.

INTRODUCTION

Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), located in Southwest Florida, through its integrated education program provides theoretical, cultural and pedagogical knowledge related to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student populations (Flores, et al., 2003). As a result, FGCU's graduates would be more inclined to emphasize the importance of language enriched environments and to respect and value cultural differences and heritage of their students (Siwatu, 2007). The integrated program fuses Early Childhood, Elementary, Secondary, and Special Education teacher preparation majors in their courses and field experiences. In addition, the program includes full Reading endorsement and endorsement for English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Full-time teacher candidates move through semesters known as Blocks and in cohort groups. Multiple field experiences and internship opportunities are integrated into courses.

As a result of the many complexities in today's student population, teacher candidates must challenge and change their thinking about the core concepts and approaches of different disciplines, to see issues from multiple perspectives, and to apply the approaches, concepts, and tools of various disciplines and professions to solve real-world problems. Through the program core courses, students explore a topic or theme in depth by working on projects that call for intellectual inquiry, physical exploration, and community service. The projects result in valuable products that have the potential to extend the knowledge and work of individuals far beyond the scope of the students who created them. Students explore diversity in its broadest view throughout the program, so that they begin to expect each student to be distinctive and individual. Whatever the diversity --- apparent skin color, language, physical differences; blurred cultural mores or behavior patterns, family structure, learning styles; or indistinguishable deep cultural values, students will be guided toward knowing about, accepting and, hopefully, promoting acceptance of the value and promise of each individual.

DEVELOPMENT

This rigorous scholarly experience is focused towards providing opportunities for future teachers to directly engage in research (*critical thinking*) by exploring the socio-cultural environment of a CLD student. Future teachers interview a CLD student and his/her parents, as well as visit his/her school when possible. This research aims to offer details about the student's culture (*intercultural knowledge*), the student's expectations, experiences and performance in the learning environment of an American school, parents' expectations regarding the student's

academic performance and the teacher's reflections on CLD student's school experiences in the light of his/her cultural and linguistic background. Therefore besides developing relevant questions for the interview, future teachers are required to analyze data collected (*critical thinking*) as well as identify relevant quality sources (*information literacy*) that support findings based on the analysis of responses. Finally, a research paper (*written communication*) is developed offering in addition recommendations for future teachers in terms of how the socio-cultural context in which a CLD student grows up can contribute to the learning environment, and ultimately to the student's academic performance. Therefore through the active engagement in this applied experience, future teachers put into practice essential content specific knowledge and dispositions in order to understand CLD families' diversity of human experiences (*intercultural knowledge*).

Study Abroad Student Teaching Experience

In exploring the best practices for preparing new teachers to meet the challenges of the changing demographics present in contemporary classrooms, cross-cultural internship experiences emerge as an important component to teacher training curriculums (Dennis, 2003; Lane, 2003). According to Bruce, Podemski & Anderson (1991), incorporating a global perspective into teacher education ensures that educators have the knowledge and skills to promote the development of a global perspective in their students. First person experience has been shown as critical to intercultural development. Intercultural experiences (or lack thereof), have a major influence on how one responds to diversity and multicultural education (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006; Bennett, 1993).

In order to provide study abroad experiences for its teacher candidates the College of Education (COE) at FGCU initiated in 2008 an international agreement for student teaching exchanges with Szent István Egyetem in Hungary. The focus of the exchange initiative is to encourage student teachers to think about who they are and what factors have influenced their identities. Several other aims are: to strengthen and extend the use of research based ESOL teaching strategies, place the issues of cultural diversity in a broader global context, and live the experience of an "immigrant" student. The program consists of American student teachers spending three weeks teaching English and American Culture in Szent Istvan's Practice School; making presentations to local clubs, churches, libraries and travel throughout Hungary. This program presents opportunities to conduct a study related to exploring the impact of student teaching abroad on their teaching dispositions and understanding of working within a culturally

and linguistically diverse environment. Cultural realization, the power of language, perspective consciousness, and pedagogical understanding emerged from this study as significant themes. This paper represents the analysis of five study abroad experiences (2008-2016) and numerous semesters of the Family Research project (2008-2016). The following discussion includes themes to emerge from the projects and authentic student voices which articulate and highlight the extent of individual, cultural, and professional transformations.

Cultural Realization

"I couldn't believe it, we just pulled out of the Budapest airport and the first thing I saw was a billboard for House of Cards, then the next day we went to Eger and there was a billboard for 'The Good Wife,' I saw Julianna Margulies' face all over Hungary!" (Student 1, 2012, Study Abroad).

The above remarks are examples of observations which were unique to the study abroad experience. They represent a cultural realization that emerged as a key theme in reflections and interviews. Participants articulated their amazement and discomfort with the extent to which American culture shaped and influenced the interests and habits of Hungarian youth and their culture. Adler (1975); Bodycott & Crew (2001), suggested that time spent abroad places participants in contexts that challenge their cultural beliefs, attitudes of their home country and serve as an important element in the growth of intercultural awareness. Immersion in the culture led to broadened and deeper awareness of Hungarian culture; however, immersion also significantly deepened their awareness of the impact American culture has on other cultures.

The Power of Language

"The only word I understood was my name, when they started to laugh I got paranoid and I dropped really low". (Student 3, 2012, Study Abroad)

"Thank you very much for such an informative class! It challenged me and pushed me out of my comfort zone. The family analysis helped me realize how hard I will have to work to effectively reach out to my students' families". (Student 2, 2016, Family Research)

Language as a form of discourse and a negotiation of power emerged as a theme in participants' responses; this is supported by the seminal work of Bourdieu (1991). Leistyna (2001), stated, *"there is an inextricable relationship between language and culture- language being codified culture"* (p. 437). Participants explored specific examples of the relationship between power and language; multiple examples of social occasions where participants felt "powerless,

helpless, vulnerable, paranoid or confused" because of their inability to understand or use the Hungarian language were shared. Students participating in family research also became aware of the power language affords native speakers. They became immersed in family cultures with rich personal histories of persistence in their journey to assimilate to a culture without the benefit of the power language affords. Participants in both experiences shared unique experiences in their history where they were unsympathetic or showed bias toward a non-English speaking student or person. All articulated a "new understanding of language barriers;" participants were able to project their experiences and connect with "this is how a culturally diverse student must feel". The ability to place oneself in another's life encourages the ability to make isomorphic attributions or similar judgments about another's behavior (Cushner & Brislin, 1996, p. 72). Such a skill is critical to the development of empathy, an essential component in understanding the power of language across cultures.

Perspective Consciousness

"In America I have had to deal with prejudice all my life, elementary school was pretty bad... but here I am loved and appreciated and for the first time treated as a human being". (Student 8, 2012, Study Abroad)

"This was by far the best critical task out of all my blocks so far. This was hand-on and the interview made an impact on me by hearing the parent out and seeing their viewpoint. I learned that everyone's perspective is different!" (Student 5, 2016, Family Research)

Harvey (1982) described perspective consciousness as an ability to understand one's own views, beliefs and experiences are not universally shared. Participants shared examples of "perspective consciousness" in their reflections, *"people kept asking me which stars I knew..."*, *"they thought I was rich because I had a car"*. Statements like these, indicate participants in both experiences were able to reflect on their own culture and examine it from an outside window. They became aware of the misconceptions held by others about Americans, began to question their stereotypes of others, and examine aspects of their own culture that had gone unexamined. Their "awakenings" confirmed findings by Mahon, (2009); Zhai (2000); Cushner & Brislin (1996), concerning the unique opportunity of experiences abroad or with "the other" in one's own culture to foster intercultural development in cognitive, affective and behavioral domains.

Pedagogical Understanding

"As a new student coming here it made me realize how hard it is to function in another language. I felt really stupid

and was often afraid of making mistakes. I began to observe very carefully what others were doing, this helped my anxiety.” (Student 7, 2012, Study Abroad).

“This assignment opened up my perspective on other ELL students. Most teachers only learn about Spanish ELLs, but there are so many more students from other cultures that need help. I truly loved this assignment because it gave the class a different view in education and what it truly means to be an educator in the 21st century.” (Student 6, 2016)

International internships and unique course assignments have great potential to impact teachers’ professional development in the areas of equipping them with new skills, attitudes and knowledge (Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Clement & Outlaw, 2002; Mahon, 2009). The participants in this study were seeking to gain experience and skill in the use of ESOL strategies by being exposed to an English immersion program and families in Southwest Florida participating in such a program. In their academic coursework and their American internship they were exposed to a range of ESOL teaching strategies and approaches; but, it was expected that they would gain confidence and new understanding about language teaching and differentiated instruction through their work in the Hungarian Immersion program and their work with CLD families. While responses indicated that participants did gain confidence and new understanding about language teaching, it seems to be the experiences of the study abroad group that provided the most powerful professional transformation. Study abroad participants related personal incidents of the power of ESOL strategies to help them navigate the language barriers that existed. Each participant related how these incidents changed their preconceived attitudes about ESOL students in their American classrooms and the importance of ESOL pedagogy to support academic and social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

The following investigation explored the impact of a family research project and a study abroad experience on teacher candidate’s view of culture, language as a powerful cultural tool and their use of ESOL strategies in classroom practice. Each participant articulated new awareness of and empathy for the immigrant, those who lose the power of language as a cultural tool. Experiences of losing their own power to communicate forced them to confront their bias and assumptions concerning English language learners in their American classrooms. Participants looked at their culture from an outside perspective and began to develop perspective consciousness; becoming aware of misconceptions held by others helped participants

confront their own misconceptions. As participants navigated new family and educational “systems” they became aware of the role of America and the American culture in the world system. More importantly, they began to realize the sacrifices made to the “taker culture” paradigm. Freire (1998) posited that an identity emerges out of one’s cultural upbringing that is carried throughout one’s life and relations with others and serves as the driving force in the classroom. If a teacher has an awareness of herself as a reciprocal learner then “she will work toward the well-being of her students and raise their consciousness of their place in the world as social, historical thinking communicating, transformative, creative persons” (Freire, 1998, p. 45). Each participant in these border crossing experiences became a teacher/learner, each was able to rise above “purely pragmatic training with its implicit or openly expressed elitist authoritarianism” and look at the world through new eyes. Critical practice is connected to the teacher’s ability to see all students as exciting human beings full of curiosity; beings who can give the teacher a view of the world through their eyes. Perhaps that view encompasses a new culture, perhaps that view causes one to look at one’s own culture through a new lens; regardless, this “dynamic relationship between what we inherit and what we acquire enlarges our vision of the world and understanding of those who inhabit it” (Freire, 1998, p. 69). For these students, their lived intercultural border crossings became the catalyst to gain a meaningful understanding of other cultures as well as one’s own place in this interconnected world.

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