

Preparing Teacher-Leaders for English Language Learners: The Role of Study Abroad

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of international study abroad to support the development of teacher-leaders to work with English language learners (ELLs). We describe the national context of teacher education for ELLs. We highlight recent literature on how study abroad can be used as one field placement experience, which appears to have a positive impact on quality teacher preparation for ELLs. Next we describe one study abroad in the Dominican Republic in 2016, an extreme poverty context, in which one preservice teacher engaged in a study abroad field experience with a non-governmental organization (NGO, *Acción Callejera*). Finally, we argue that study abroad experiences such can facilitate the preparation of teacher-leaders, because teachers gain deep cultural knowledge about ELLs and their educational backgrounds.

[122 words]

Introduction

The mismatch between teachers in the United States, who are largely white and monolingual, and an increasingly racially and linguistically-diverse student population has been

largely documented in the literature (Landsman & Lewis, 2011; Milner, 2009). At the same time, in the context of teacher education, study abroad remains “under-researched, under-theorized, and under-evaluated” (Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, & Wang, 2009, p. 325). While the student population in the U.S. grows more diverse, the teaching force remains largely mainstream and monolingual. In fact, the National Education Association (NEA) recently proclaimed that it was “time for a change,” in order to prepare quality teachers for 21st century diverse learners (NEA, 2014, n.p.).

Our focus is on the growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) children in US schools, juxtaposed with a white, monolingual teaching force. The number of ELLs across the United States is more than 4 million (NCES, 2015), and there are currently more than 265,000 ELLs in Florida public schools alone. Of that number, greater than 75% are from Spanish speaking homes (FL DOE, 2017). More specifically the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) notes that while almost half of all children under five years of age are considered racial or ethnic ‘minority,’ 80% of bachelor’s degrees in education were awarded to non-Latino whites (AACTE, 2016). Many scholars have questioned the preparation of white monolingual teachers to work with diverse learners (Howard, 2010; Tatum, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). The question of how to prepare preservice teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners continues to plague teacher educators.

Quality Teacher Education for ELLs

The need for teachers to be well prepared to teach ELLs extends far beyond the state of Florida (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez (2008). What knowledge, skills, and dispositions

are necessary for teachers to work with ELLs in today's schools? Scholars in the field of teacher education and ELL have noted several important items in the preparation of high quality teachers. For example, research on teacher quality with ELLs has shown that teachers need extensive knowledge and skills across three areas: (a) contextual understanding of their ELLs, including knowledge of students' home background, culture, and language; (b) knowledge and skills that link effective instructional practices to ELLs' backgrounds and particular learning needs; and (c) the ability to navigate educational policies and practices to ensure inclusive learning environments (see Figure 1) (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2016; de Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013). In addition, high quality teachers are reflective of their practices and make ongoing changes to their instruction to ensure that all students are learning (Zeichner & Liston, 2013).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

With respect to the first area, contextual understandings of ELLs' experiences, the authors noted that high quality teachers of ELLs "must learn about ELLs' personal linguistic histories and cultural experiences, both within and beyond school" (de Jong, et al., 2013, p. 91). This goes beyond simply 'knowing your student' to more detailed understanding of the individual child. However, the same research notes the difficulty of teachers to understand the home- and background- context of their ELLs, including where students are from, their home

literacy practices (Coady, 2009), and what education in their home country looks like. It is not uncommon for teachers to focus on the immediate needs of the classroom but not recognize the connection between the realities of their students' lives and their learning in school (Coady & Ariza, 2010).

The second area that research shows builds expertise of teachers to work with ELLs is teachers' ability to modify and differentiate instruction for ELLs, based on their pedagogical skills and knowledge. The pedagogical content knowledge of teachers of ELLs includes a deep understanding of how the English language works, as well as how to ensure that language is 'visible' across all academic content areas (Turkan, de Oliveira, Lee, & Phelps, 2014). However, when asked about their ability to connect students' language and culture to classroom instruction, teachers note feeling un- or under-prepared for the task (Coady, de Jong & Harper, 2010, 2011). The ability to differentiate instruction based on ELLs' linguistic and cultural background underscores the importance of truly knowing ELLs and connecting that information to the art of teaching.

The third area that reflects high quality teachers of ELLs is teachers' ability to navigate educational policies and practices to ensure inclusive learning environments. Educational policies include not only local school district procedures but also state- and national-level policies, such as federal acts (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act and federal immigration policies) that affect the education of immigrant children in general and ELLs in particular (Coady, Heffington, & Marichal, 2017). Teachers who effectively respond to ELLs' learning needs realize that they must communicate with non-English speaking families and address, in some cases, recognize the challenges of communicating across vast, rural educational settings (Coady,

Coady, & Nelson, 2015). Taken together, these three areas describe a broad yet detailed scope of expertise that is essential to high quality teachers of ELLs.

Study Abroad as Field Experience

One area that holds promise for preparing teachers for English learner children is study abroad programs as field experiences. Some scholars (Reyes 2009; Teague, 2010) argue that field experiences such as study abroad are paramount to building high quality teachers for ELLs because they inform teachers directly of the context and background of many of their students, particularly those who have immigrated to the US. Research in this area is limited, but some research demonstrates the transformative effect that study abroad has on preservice teachers (Kasun & Saavedra, 2016; Phillion et al., 2009; Reyes, 2009; Teague, 2010).

For example, Teague (2010) studied the change in attitude and beliefs of six focal participants, who engaged in a cross-cultural field experience during their teacher education program. Each participant spent 15 hours in a diverse community setting over the course of one semester. Teague found that the participants' views of diverse learners reflected "increased and more accurate knowledge" of ELLs (p. 205) after their field experience. Participants' beliefs were overall more positive of ELLs upon completion of the field experience, and they felt better prepared to work with ELLs.

In their three-week study abroad program in Honduras, studied over a six-year period, Phillion et al. (2009) investigated the perceptions of 54 preservice teachers of the study abroad to prepare them as teachers? They also wanted to identify pedagogical implications for US classroom teachers. They found that students grappled with three areas: social class (namely

living in extreme poverty communities), gendered assumptions of US women, and experiencing racial and ethnic diversity abroad. The authors used individual student experiences to describe the transformation that students underwent in the experience, noting “the lived experience of studying abroad provides preservice teachers the intellectual and critical *starting point* for multicultural awareness of the educational, social, and political relationships between their lives and other cultures” (p. 335, emphasis added).

One of the main challenges with engaging students in study abroad programs is that many preservice teacher education programs have numerous state and national performance standards for students, which makes deviating from such tightly-controlled programs nearly impossible. Preservice teachers must think creatively as to how they can take time “off” of their teacher education program in order to participate in study abroad. At our institution, this remains a challenge, as coursework associated with study abroad is often not recognized as meeting an undergraduate pre-requirement; rather, the study abroad is considered to be simply an ‘add-on’ of additional credit hours towards the overall degree program.

More recently, Kasun and Saavedra (2016) studied the identity disruption among eight preservice teachers who participated in an indigenous study abroad in Mexico. Using critical ethnographic methods, the scholars’ aim was to “decenter participants toward the ends of learning decolonizing pedagogies” (p. 692). They found that students became more socially aware, more empathetic and engaged in “deep personal introspection,” and creators of a loving learning space versus classroom managers (p. 695). The empathy that the students displayed before and after the experience moved from more superficial notions of empathy toward shifts in power relations and personal and social transformation” (p. 698). Overall, though

there is a dearth of research on study abroad as an avenue for preparing high quality teachers of ELLs, existing data demonstrate that study abroad is a promising and potentially transformative experience for students.

Methodology

To understand one preservice teacher's experiences of study abroad and how it informed her view of herself as a teacher of ELLs, we used several qualitative methods. First, we used journaling between the preservice teacher, Amber, and the supervising faculty, Maria. We chose to journal because Amber's departure to the Dominican Republic (D.R.) preceded Maria's and journaling was an important mode of reflection and communicating Amber's experiences. The initial idea for journaling was to communicate any particular needs and resources that Amber identified while in the D.R. (such as school supplies and books) that Maria could later bring with her. It was only after Amber arrived in Santiago, the city where the study abroad took place, that journaling took a different focus—one where Amber was thinking critically through the experience of the D.R. The journaling, then, became a space where Amber was able to make sense of the experience. We analyzed the journals by initially segmenting them into three parts: the early departure period (early May, 2016), the end of the experience (late June, 2016), and six months after the study abroad ended (about December, 2016). Data from each of those time periods are presented below.

The second data collection method used was orally co-constructing the experience through conversations between Amber and Maria. Amber's teaching partner, Susie (pseudonym), also contributed to Amber's understanding of the teaching and learning

experience and was a sounding-board for Amber throughout the entire six-week study abroad program. Amber and Maria, along with Susie, debriefed after teaching experience at the school setting in the D.R. Together we co-planned and co-designed curriculum for the children before each class. One of our activities was adapting a Spanish language early literacy curriculum, called CANTA. The children had a wide-range of literacy skills, from beginning sound-symbol correspondence through intermediate reading skills, and we matched the various parts of the CANTA curriculum, such as a phoneme-awareness BINGO game, to children's reading ability levels. We also co-planned our work at the study abroad office Santiago, where we organized materials and made copies of early literacy books for students to read. Maria took notes after meeting with Amber, and documented their upcoming activities.

Finally, together we analyzed the archival data and material culture that was visible in the classroom, including the books and reading materials, curricular materials, and the mission statement of *Acción Callajera*. Amber captured the learning environment with pictures and of the classroom, the school, and students' work. For example, she captured the children's individual "maps of their community" with her camera. She later used those materials for further reflection about the challenges and successes of implementing that lesson at the school.

Maria created handouts to provide professional preparation materials for other teachers from *Acción Callajera* in order for them to use CANTA. She provided two professional development workshops for teachers. All of these materials demonstrated how the study abroad experience was reflected upon and adapted to the D. R. context.

We analyzed data by co-constructing the experiences, and reading and re-reading our journals and Amber's final, reflective essay on the experience. We highlighted places that were repeated in the data, creating categories that demonstrated significant learning and shifts in Amber's understanding the effect of study abroad.

One Case: A Preservice Teacher in the Dominican Republic

At the time of the study abroad experience, Amber was a preservice teacher at a university in the state of Florida. She partook in the five-year teacher preparation program that awarded a Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) degree upon completion of the program. Amber was in her final semester of the undergraduate portion of the program (4th year undergraduate) and was looking forward to teaching in her own classroom. During her program, her practicum experiences spanned from grades kindergarten through the sixth grade. Amber was just starting her final year in the teacher-preparation program when she decided to embark on her second study abroad experience (the first was in Heredia, Costa Rica the year before).

The Dominican Republic study abroad was a six-week experience located in the urban city, Santiago de los Caballeros. Santiago is the second largest city in the D.R. and the fourth largest in the Caribbean. The D.R. is an island nation, which is shared with the Republic of Haiti. Since the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, Haitians have sought refuge in the D.R. and form a significant labor force. Some of those children participate in the *Acción Callajera* learning centers. The *barrios* or neighborhoods in which the university study abroad students were placed to teach could be considered extreme poverty settings. Children and families lived in homes constructed of corrugated metal and cardboard. They lacked running water and

paved streets. When rains were heavy, the alleyways and streets flooded, making access to the school sites impossible. Children attended the learning centers of *Acción Callejera* each day. Each learning center had a lead teacher, but the teacher was not required to have a teaching credential, because the centers were not officially part of the public school system.

University students registering for the study abroad were required to take 6 academic credits or two courses while in the D.R. One was *Cultura Dominicana* (Dominican Culture) and the second was an intermediate Spanish language course. The university students took both courses while teaching in the learning centers two half days each week. The teaching experience was considered to be a “service learning” component of the program. Most of the 22 university students who participated were not in a teacher education program. Only Amber was officially in the university elementary teacher education program and had the skills to manage a classroom, design learning objectives, and identify instructional strategies and assessments. The following is Amber’s account of why she registered in the study abroad program and what she aimed to learn from it.

During a class in the midst of my teacher preparation program, a professor told us to take a look at the people in the room. What demographic did I see? I looked at my peers, and saw an overwhelming reflection of myself: white, middle-class women. This moment altered the track that my personal teacher-preparation would take as I realized the contradiction of the increasingly diverse student population and the current majority of white, middle-class female teachers.

I promised myself that, while I could not change my ethnicity and background, I did have power over my perspective and awareness. This is the main reason I chose to

enroll in a study abroad program in Santiago, Dominican Republic where I would be aiding in the teaching and learning of local children through an organization called *Acción Callejera* (accioncallejera.org). I had previously spent four months abroad in Heredia, Costa Rica. I knew that I had learned more in those four months than the three years I had spent in college... I said the same thing to myself over and over: I want to be the best teacher that I can be... I needed to know more about the world around me and the conditions that some children are subjected to that I never was. I needed to gain perspective that would help mold me into a culturally responsive, responsible and reflective teacher.

Scholarship on reflective practitioners indicates that reflection is one of the most powerful tools that a teacher can develop and use (Brookfield, 2017). Brookfield notes, for example, that a critically reflective practitioner “hunts down” one’s assumptions in order to question and challenging inequities in and across educational contexts (p. 3). More than a decade ago, John Dewey (1916), long considered to be the father of modern education, noted that good teachers reflected on their observations of children, their professional knowledge, and their teaching experiences so that they could nurture each child’s learning. Amber similarly used reflection as a tool for understanding and making sense of the extreme poverty learning environment. In one of her early reflection journals, she wrote:

Today was our first day in the *salas* [classrooms]. It was a lot to take in and not exactly what I expected. We walked into the site which has a basketball court at the entrance, a cafeteria-like area next and then there is a classroom in the back. We walked into the classroom and met the teacher and almost were

immediately left to have the classroom to ourselves. We did not expect this nor were we prepared... There was also such an extreme lack of materials that creating an activity was hard. I was also struggling heavily with the language barrier, which will be a constant struggle these next six weeks. (5/11/16)

In addition to the learning conditions, Amber emailed her concerns of safety and transportation to Maria. She dreaded taking the local *conchos*, private vehicles that operated as a paid, taxi system throughout the city. She was not prepared for the dangers of crossing the streets to hail a *concho*. In addition, she was vigilant of the constant “tssks” from local men, and could not put on the clothes she was comfortable wearing in the United States for fear of drawing unwanted attention. She became “hyper aware of how different [she] was from the people around” her, just touching the surface of how some children might feel every day in a ‘typical’ classroom in the United States.

Within the first few weeks of her experience, Amber began to contrast the educational differences between the D.R. and the U.S., as well as the difficulty of reconciling the differences:

Inside the classroom in the DR I was placed in, things grew more difficult. The classroom itself was located in a high-poverty neighborhood where the children would arrive somewhere around 8:00 A.M. and leave whenever they wanted to. There was no enforcement in keeping the children in the classroom... I realized that the classroom operated more as a daycare center, without learning objectives, classroom management, or assessments to gauge student learning. The children... consisted of ages from a six-month-old baby to fourteen years old.

There would be from twenty to thirty children that arrived to the center each day but the number was never sure, making planning-for-learning very challenging.

Four weeks into the field experience, Amber's reflections began to take on a new perspective. She continued to build relationships with the children who regularly showed up at the learning center, and she was determined to use her skills and knowledge as a preservice teacher to facilitate the students' learning. In her reflection journal of June 2, 2016, she wrote:

I took out the homemade flashcards we made (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division), and students started playing games with them on their own and practicing their math facts! I gave stickers to the winners. It was truly amazing today. We had a couple of students stay in the classroom *for the whole three hours*. That has not happened before. One girl even asked me permission to go outside, instead of just leaving. Today I finally felt as if our efforts were making at least a small difference. [emphasis retained]

When Maria arrived in the D.R. during the fourth week, we started to implement an early literacy curriculum in Spanish called CANTA. The CANTA curriculum became a structure within which we were able to focus on Spanish literacy development and set specific learning objectives. Designed for early Spanish literacy in the U.S., the CANTA curriculum uses sound-awareness (phonology) and song to build early literacy skills. The curriculum moved from sounds and rhythm into small books and stories. For example, the BINGO game associated with the curriculum had students identify the sounds of letters rather the names of the individual

letters, e.g., the letter “b” sounds like bha, rather than bee. Students in the classroom initially struggled with learning the sounds of Spanish letters and then building those into words. However, they liked the competition of the game and were engaged with the task. Within two weeks, five to six of the students between grades 1 and 4, began to read the short stories in the CANTA curriculum independently.

Beyond the curriculum, however, Amber noticed that she herself was learning a lot about cross-cultural education, building relationships with students, and cross-cultural classroom management. She wrote:

Ultimately we provided the students a structured learning environment where they were able to practice saying “*por favor*” (please), wait in a line without pushing, and completing the activity that was taking place. Prior to our work, the students were almost never required to finish what they had started. By the end of our time in that classroom, I saw pride in students’ faces when they completed an assignment or project. They almost always asked to hang their products on the wall for everyone to see. I saw learning take place in a classroom that had so much less than the classrooms I was accustomed to teaching in... In the end, my students ended up teaching me much more than I could have ever hoped to teach them.

Six months after the study abroad ended, Amber demonstrated a critical perspective that reflected a deep empathy for children in the D.R. and connected to working with ELLs in the US. She wrote:

I learned how to make less into something more. I learned that, despite my privileged upbringing, I had a capacity to connect with what we would call disadvantaged students. I had to ask myself in the final days of my program if those children really were “disadvantaged.” While my students in the United States complained about not having a Mac computer, these students in Santiago found amusement in the plants outside the classroom. They knew how to create fun out of an empty room, and were grateful for the smallest and simplest materials. They taught me how to take a seemingly disadvantaged situation and turn it into one of positivity and growth.

I returned to the United States with a perspective that seemed completely foreign from the one with which I started. I felt a higher competence in empathizing with my students. I had more patience and felt less stressed when things didn’t go as planned. I understand what it is like to not be able to express oneself in a second language. My experience abroad gave me an awareness that my university and hometown could never offer. I feel more prepared to teach diverse students with a mindfulness that grew to surprising lengths.

The cross cultural aspect of her teaching took shape in two ways: by learning to have less control and to see the benefit of the socio-cultural classroom environment. Amber described this as:

My classroom management became one of less control, which ultimately gives the students more control. This moves my classroom more towards a genuine

student-centered approach where students are better able to be responsible for their own learning, ultimately preparing to take on the role of active citizens in the community.

Discussion

Study abroad has the potential to build teachers' knowledge of ELLs and to address the mismatch between the increasing number of diverse students in the U.S. and a white monolingual teaching force. Amber's experience alerted her to cultural differences between education in the U.S. and the D.R., particularly in terms of social class differences and poverty, gender roles, and resources available in education. Transportation was another area that caused considerable reflection due to the differences in safety and availability of transport for the university students in the study abroad program.

In addition, there were also vast differences between how a teacher in the D.R. would organize a classroom and manage student learning. Amber's frustration over student's less structured day transformed into an appreciation of creativity in education, namely how fewer resources could achieve a similar goal. She also learned that there were different priorities in teaching diverse learners, and part of teaching includes building trust and recognizing the cultural background of individual students.

Of the three areas above that we believe facilitates the preparation of teacher-leaders with enhanced knowledge of teaching ELLs, understanding the context of ELLs is most aligned to study abroad and its implications for teachers. Study abroad experiences—particularly those

that take place in venues from where immigrant, ELL students emigrate—may be most useful for teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the context of education for their students.

Global Competencies Learned

Phillion et al. (2009) noted two main challenges for teacher education: first is how to work with diverse students; second is how to develop preservice teachers' global competencies. It seems that this case of study abroad achieved both of these aims by merging global competencies with teaching diverse ELLs. However, two main questions remain: first, is a six-week study abroad too long (or too short) to build teacher competencies or critical reflection? We wondered if a shorter study abroad would achieve similar outcomes, because Amber's shift in her work with the students occurred at week 4 of the study abroad. The question of 'length of time abroad' may be important one for students in preservice teacher education programs, who are locked tightly into coursework that is difficult to modify. Second, should there be a more fixed curriculum for preservice teachers in study abroad settings, or is there a benefit to creating an ad-hoc curriculum and materials once there? Phillion and colleagues (2009, p. 333) found that a "carefully planned study abroad curriculum" provides White preservice teachers with the opportunity to explore and teach multicultural and global issues. It is not clear if that will become part of Amber's classroom in the future, but further longitudinal data would illuminate this issue. The D.R. study abroad had a less structured format and curriculum, which made the application from the D.R. to US classrooms less clear from its inception.

Finally, there is a greater need on post-study abroad reflections, six months and a year after the program ends. We believe that high quality teachers of ELLs and teacher-leaders continually reflect on their practice and observe their students in order to work most effectively (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The benefits of study abroad aren't always immediately known. Reflection that focuses on key differences between U.S. and foreign classrooms, such as classroom management, and culturally-relevant literacy and literature, would be most useful to help connect the study abroad experience to U.S. classrooms.

Conclusion

Study abroad has the potential to deepen teachers' knowledge of ELLs by illuminating teachers' understanding of students' home languages, their home country, and cross-cultural connections to classroom management and instructional practices. This study has demonstrated how one preservice teacher was not only transformed by the study abroad experience, but also how her reflection during and after the experience allowed her to acquire what scholars refer to as "enhanced knowledge and skills." Although this study was limited to one student's experience, ultimately the depth of her awareness of ELLs and the global competencies she acquired will benefit both herself and future students she will teach.

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Figure 1: Enhanced Knowledge and Skills of Teachers of ELLs (de Jong, Coady, & Harper, 2013).

