

Chapter 6

Preservice Teacher Reflections about Short- Term Summer Study Abroad Experiences in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies 21 preservice teachers' blog reflections about working in an Italian classroom and living with a host family during a four-week study abroad program in Northern Italy. During the program, preservice teachers were required to blog about their experiences living and studying abroad using personal blog sites. To encourage more candid reflection about the program, the blog posts could be related to any aspect of the program preservice teachers chose to reflect on. After setting the context of the study through description of the study abroad program and its requirements, the authors present qualitative findings regarding preservice teachers' (a) thoughts related to their observations of Italian classrooms, (b) thoughts related to becoming an Italian language learner, and (c) lessons learned from the study abroad experience. Findings discuss preservice teachers' reflections on making sense of educational and cultural differences, experiences as Italian language learners, and opportunities for professional and personal growth.

INTRODUCTION

Preparing teachers to serve culturally diverse students is an important component of teacher education programs, particularly in today's rapidly changing cultural landscape (Howard, 2003). However, teachers often have a deficit-based view of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers may view these students as possessing shortcomings in language and learning rather than

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valuing the unique cultural and linguistic traits they bring to the classroom. Following Howard's (2003) suggestion that teacher educators must re-conceptualize how preservice teachers are prepared to better serve CLD students, this chapter describes a four-week study abroad program that immersed preservice teachers in Italian school and family settings. Specifically, the program sought to engage preservice teachers in an enriched perspective-taking experience through study abroad that provided first-hand experience as second-language learners in culturally and geographically foreign home and school settings.

Study abroad programs that involve intense personal experiences in a culture may have the potential to help preservice teachers explore cultural issues and develop the dispositions needed to implement culturally responsive teaching. Directly interacting with others from a host country creates opportunities for preservice teachers "to broaden their cultural knowledge, learn how others view the world from an insider's perspective, develop a global perspective, and increase their understanding of the value of multicultural education" (Cushner, 2009, p. 158). Teachers who are sensitive to the culture of their students, who are aware of cultural norms, and who are guided by culturally responsive pedagogical principles are more likely to create a classroom environment in which the social and academic needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students can be addressed (Sleeter, 1995). That is, CLD students are better served when their teachers believe that all students are capable learners who bring knowledge and strengths to the learning environment. Specifically, teacher education programs should engage preservice teachers in activities that help them to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to develop cultural awareness and to implement culturally responsive teaching. To develop cultural awareness that may lead to pedagogically appropriate practices, preservice teachers must engage in "a cognitive and affective process or activity that

1. Requires active engagement on the part of the individual;
2. Is triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience;
3. Involves examining one's responses, beliefs, and premises in light of the situation at hand; and
4. Results in integration of the new understanding into one's experience" (Rogers, 2001, p. 41).

This chapter provides rich descriptions of such activities through a study of preservice teacher's thoughts and experiences, gathered through analysis of personal blogs written during the program, as they participated in a study abroad program for education. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how preservice teachers perceived their experiences in an immersive study abroad program focused on cultural and second-language learning in Italian families and schools.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

A developing trend among 21st century teacher education programs has been to move beyond the traditional course-based approach to multicultural education to a push for internationalization, such as supporting global thinking, redesigning curricula to include foreign language competencies, fostering global literacy, and encouraging students to participate in study abroad experiences (Armstrong, 2008; Quezada & Cordeiro, 2007). Cushner (2007) argued that while study abroad in general is beneficial for all students, international field experiences are particularly salient for preservice teachers. Scholars have noted numerous positive benefits from such experiences. These include both personal changes such as development of self-confidence and flexibility (see Cushner, 2007 for a review) and growth as a

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