

Chapter 19

Bridging Local and Global Experiences: A Faculty–Led Study Abroad Program for Teachers

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ABSTRACT

To internationalize the K-12 curriculum and instructional practices, there is an increasing need to provide study-abroad opportunities for practicing teachers. In this chapter, the authors describe the design of a recent Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad (GPA) program that offer practicing teachers from different grade levels and content areas the opportunity to bridge their local and global experiences. The intentional design of program activities at the pre-departure, in-country, and re-entry phases is detailed based on research regarding teachers' communities of practice, teacher change, and the cultural transition framework. In addition to program activities, the challenges faculty directors and participants experienced and the strategies employed to leverage these challenges into learning opportunities are discussed. Recommendations for similar study-abroad programs involving practicing teachers are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Providing teachers with authentic overseas experiences is one of the most effective approaches to internationalizing teacher education (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). Summarizing studies on overseas experiences for preservice teachers, Cushner (2007) highlighted benefits such as developing teachers' cultural and political knowledge of the host country, understanding of self and empathetic understanding of others, enhancing self-confidence and efficacy, improving intercultural sensitivity, and creating a potential long-

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term impact as teachers transform their developed understanding into classroom actions. While more teacher education programs are introducing overseas field experience opportunities (Cushner, 2007; Mahon, 2007, 2010; Zhao, Meyers, & Meyers, 2010), most are designed for preservice teachers. Studies regarding programs designed specifically for practicing teachers are very limited (Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Gleeson & Tait, 2012). One of the most challenging aspects for study-abroad programs designed specifically for practicing teachers is the meaningful integration of participants' global experiences into their local classroom instruction.

In this chapter, the authors describe the design of a recent Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad (GPA) program that attempted to bridge this gap between the participants' local and global experiences. In addition to the specifics regarding the designed activities, we also highlight the challenges faculty directors and participants experienced, and strategies employed to leverage the challenges into learning opportunities. Recommendations for faculty who are interested in designing similar study-abroad programs involving practicing teachers are also provided.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PROJECT DESIGN

Research regarding teachers' communities of practice (CoPs), teacher change, and the cultural transition framework guided the design of this program. In this section, we briefly introduce the theoretical background and describe the specific program activities designed based on the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Background

This exploration of teachers' overseas experiences was situated within the communities of practice (CoPs) framework. CoPs refer to "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.3). Through shared experiences and continuing opportunities for interactions, CoP participants develop both individual perspectives and shared knowledge, practices and approaches. CoPs have three common elements: a domain of knowledge, a community of people, and a shared practice (Wenger et al., 2002). This framework has been widely used to explore teachers' professional learning as well as how teachers negotiate meaning through situated learning (Niesz, 2010). It has also been used to examine the overseas experiences of teachers through identification of the sense of joint enterprise, norms and relationships of mutuality, and shared repertoire of communal resources (Gleeson & Tait, 2012). In this program, the CoP framework guided us to design a program that engaged all participants in activities with local and global partners in order to make meaning of their intercultural experiences.

Situated in this specific CoP, we integrated theories regarding teacher change as well as cultural transition to design program activities to impact teachers' personal and professional growth. Rooted in psychology, both theoretical orientations explore human interactions and development in terms of affect, behavior and cognition (ABCs).

Teacher change involves shifts in cognition and behavior (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Cognition refers to a collection of teachers' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives (Borg, 2003) that guide classroom decision-making and behaviors, (Fullan, 2007; Pajare, 1992; Richardson, 1996). The development of such cognitive beliefs is influenced by affective factors such as motivation, stress, belongings,

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