

Chapter 9

Meaningful Language and Cultural Experiences for Future Teachers in Puerto Rico

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ABSTRACT

The authors describe a faculty led study abroad program implemented in Puerto Rico. The short-term study abroad model highlights both design and implementation strategies for travel abroad. This chapter also focuses on the unique cultural and linguistic experiences in Puerto Rico which were planned for college students in an early childhood education teacher preparation program. The chapter addresses the strategies used to facilitate learning about Puerto Rican culture and languages, methods to support students learning dual languages and strategies for working with families, communities, and other professionals. The chapter concludes with lessons learned from this experience and emphasizes both issues and recommendations for faculty who are developing future short-term travel experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad provides an opportunity for students to participate in a program of study outside of their home countries. In many cases, these programs allow students to earn academic credits towards their college degrees at their home institutions. When making the decision to participate in a study abroad program, students are able to select a program of their interest in a destination they may want to explore. The leading destinations for American students are the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, and China (Open Doors, 2014). Although many American students and faculty participate in these international study abroad opportunities, this professor targeted a travel study experience in Puerto Rico, which is often an untraveled destination in terms of study abroad opportunities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9672-3.ch009

Why Puerto Rico? There are many reasons why this island was selected for this experience. Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States, rich with history and culture. This tropical island is located in the Caribbean and has a population of 3,615,086 people (Pew Research Center, 2014). Puerto Ricans are United States citizens who speak one or both of the official languages on the island, Spanish and English. These factors make the island an interesting location to explore the complexities of teaching and learning two languages while also learning about the Puerto Rican culture. Puerto Rico was the most adequate location for the faculty led program titled *Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Settings*.

This chapter discusses both the background information and the theoretical framework necessary to understand the context and course design for this short-term travel experience in Puerto Rico. The study abroad model is explained to highlight the design and implementation of these travel experiences. The chapter also addresses the lessons learned by emphasizing the issues and recommendations for future short-term travel experiences abroad.

BACKGROUND

Teacher preparation programs in the United States aim to prepare future teachers to work effectively with all students, including those whose first language is not English. Early childhood education programs attain this goal by meeting the teaching standards that focus on the learner and learning, content knowledge, appropriate pedagogical practices, and relationships with families and communities (Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium [InTASC], 2011; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2011). The course, *Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Settings*, supports many of the NAEYC standards, but particularly, NAEYC Standard 1: Promoting Child Development and Learning; Standard 2: Building Families and Community Relationships; and Standard 4: Using Developmentally Appropriate Approaches. These standards assist in assuring that candidates in teacher preparation programs know and understand learners, diverse families, and effective strategies and tools for early education (NAEYC, 2011).

The *Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Settings* course is regularly offered to undergraduate students on campus. The course addresses issues of culture, language, and pedagogical practices in early care and education programs. The course also compares the language development of dual language children versus monolingual children, and the impact that language development has in educational settings. In this course, students explore instructional strategies to support the language and academic performance of dual language learners in early childhood classrooms for children ages birth to eight years old and their families. The course also explores strategies on how to work in collaboration with families, communities, and other professionals such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) specialists. These strategies serve as a vital resource for preservice teachers who are learning about the cultural continuity needed in the classroom to build successful interactions with children of diverse backgrounds. All of these areas are stressed in this course to assist students' understanding of dual language learners and their ability to become culturally responsive teachers in the future.

One of the terms used in the title of this course is dual language learners. Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro (2013) define this term as “young learners who are acquiring two languages simultaneously or who are

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