

Chapter 25

Walking in English Learners' Shoes: Preservice Teacher Struggles Result in Empathy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a university short-term study abroad immersion experience in Costa Rica for preservice teachers. Qualitative data from instructors' field notes and participants' photo blogs, exit interviews, and formal course evaluations were analyzed for evidence of expressions of empathy for English Learners (ELs), resolve to use effective teaching strategies with ELs, personal growth and cross-cultural awareness. Findings show that participants demonstrated empathy that was linked to personal and professional growth as a future teacher. The course's design strategically causing authentic physical and emotional struggles similar to ELs' with purposefully facilitated reflection time to address feelings and experiences was effective in achieving overall course goals.

INTRODUCTION

In the 2011-2012 academic year, 9.1% or approximately 4.4 million of public K-12 school students in the US were English Learners (ELs). There has been a steady growth across the nation in all but 10 states since 2008-2009. Of the 4.4 million children, it was estimated that 85% were economically disadvantaged, 61% were in elementary school (Kindergarten to Grade 5; K-5), 20% were in Grades 6-8 and 19% were in Grades 9-12 (US Department of Education, 2014). Approximately 79% of ELs in the US were from Spanish-language backgrounds (Payan & Nettles, 2007). These statistics may not represent a true picture

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because in 2014, 22.7% of California's public school students were ELs, but 43.1% of public school students spoke a language other than English in the home (California Department of Education, 2015).

While many ELs experience situational economic difficulties, they also come from a range of cultural backgrounds, speak over 150 languages (many of these are separate languages or dialects grouped into a general category) (Batalova & McHugh, 2010) and bring with them a variety of educational, social and personal experiences. School districts, as part of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, are required by law to meet targets for ELs set by their states or face sanctions. It is estimated that there is only one ESL certified teacher for every 150 ELs in the US (George Washington University, 2013), so regular K-12 classroom teachers are expected to help these students fill in educational gaps and make significant progress. Teachers cannot be expected to learn all of their EL's languages. However, by experiencing the struggle of living in a new culture with lower economic wealth, and being surrounded and learning a new language in an immersion inquiry study abroad course, preservice teachers can gain empathy for their students, recognize and break down barriers, and learn strategies and build pathways to more effective English language learning.

Preservice teachers can also greatly benefit from developing the qualities of a globally-oriented citizen. The globally-oriented citizen maintains a delicate balance between potentially conflicting virtues, such as appreciation of our common humanity and of our deep differences, courage of conviction and humility, a firm sense of one's moral identity and a willingness to revise it, internationalism as well as patriotism, and rootedness in a community as well as openness to others (Parekh, 2003). *How can a short-term study abroad experience and its predictable struggles to become comfortable in another culture develop preservice teachers' empathy for the struggles of ELs in US classrooms? How can 'walking in their shoes' ultimately benefit preservice teachers in becoming globally oriented citizens?* We assert that an inquiry approach based on careful recruitment, induction, and program development that includes ample time for introspection and facilitated reflection develops global citizen-teachers who emerge from the study abroad experience with a heightened ability to synthesize their own moral and cultural identity and appreciation for and empathy with those children and their families engaged in the struggle for global citizenship in English-speaking classrooms.

BACKGROUND

Empathy is a crucial outcome of this short-term study abroad experience. We define empathy as the capacity to feel the experience(s) of others (Kohut, 1959; Parekh, 2003) and to enter into their 'inner life' to see and understand the world as they do. Empathy includes both an introspective, cognitive component and an affective quality. Psychologists indicate that empathy is developed over time and progresses from automatic mimicry (Iacoboni, 2009) to cognitive processing that involves the ability to imagine the experiences of another. Decety and Jackson (2004) described components of empathy as including: affective sharing and emotional regulation (ability to sense and share the feelings of another); self-awareness (ability to differentiate the experiences of another from his or her own); and perspective-taking (ability to imagine the experiences of another). Empathy can motivate conscious pro-social and empathic action (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). That is, preservice teachers must engage in the struggle to cultivate virtues that result in positive actions on behalf of their future ELs. Much of the research on study abroad experiences for teachers (e.g., Doppen & An, 2014; Rodriquez, 2011; Martinsen, 2011) is

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