

Chapter 87

“Should I Go to Ireland or Mexico?”: A Comparison of Two Pre–Student Teaching Study Abroad Programs Offered by the Same Department

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents and discusses the experience of two university professors’ participation in two different study abroad programs. Within the first two years of employment at the university, one professor went to Oaxaca and the other went to Ireland with groups of pre-student teachers. The chapter discusses previous literature and the impact of study abroad programs on teacher education, program basics from the authors’ university, the authors’ personal experiences travelling with students for the first time, commonalities and differences among the two programs, benefits from their experiences, and ideas for further development of effective study abroad programs for education students.

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities to study abroad within teacher education are becoming more and more popular. Various colleges and universities offer their preservice teachers the chance to student teach in an international setting. For the most part, researchers have praised these programs for being beneficial in helping students become more culturally aware, gain pedagogical understandings, and learn how to teach to diverse students later in their careers (e.g., Biraimah & Jotia, 2012; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, & Wang, 2009; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Willard-Holt, 2001). These ideas are similar at the authors’ institution where multiple opportunities are offered for students to study abroad before and during student teaching.

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“Should I Go to Ireland or Mexico?”

The university’s goal is to help students develop intercultural awareness and expand their viewpoint on global education. Malewski and Phillion (2009) identified student reported gains of “improved foreign language skills, increased ability to navigate unfamiliar cultural and national contexts, a more critical attitude toward countries of origin, and a heightened interest in future study abroad” (p. 52). The authors’ university embraces these potential gains, as well as encouraging pre-student teachers to develop independence, a sense of maturity, and an eagerness to pursue teaching in a diverse society.

BACKGROUND

In a review of the relevant literature, the authors found that most of the work concerning study abroad programs offers a large amount of details on the qualitative and quantitative results and the perceptions of the students who participated in them. A large number of colleges and universities offer study abroad programs for their pre-student teachers. Though research has suggested that these programs are useful for helping students come back with new perspectives about the world and how to teach diverse students, there are also some critics of the usefulness of these types of programs (Biraimah & Jotia, 2012; Garri, 2009; Phillion et al., 2009; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Willard-Holt, 2001; Woolf, 2006). In this section, we will briefly discuss the literature describing both the benefits and challenges of study abroad programs for pre-student teachers and what students gain from participating in these programs

Generally the literature concerning study abroad programs is favorable, with the exception of few authors such as Woolf (2006) who critiques study abroad programs geared toward “non-traditional countries” as “a kind of voyeurism in which privileged young Americans go to observe relative poverty in a developing country” (p. 136). In the same vein, Zemach-Bersin (2007) claims study abroad programs “reproduces the logic of colonialism, legitimizes American imperialist desires, and allows for the interested of U.S. foreign policy to be articulated through the specious rhetoric of global universality” (p. 17).

More often than not, however, the authors of these studies, who are usually faculty leaders of these programs, praise study abroad for the positive impact that they have on their students. This is especially the case for those students who do their student teaching abroad. For example, Garri (2009) offers that students who student taught in developing countries learned flexibility, “increased comfort and ability to work with ambiguity and uncertainty” and had increased “self confidence” in their teaching practice (p. 97). In their own study about the cultural understanding gained by pre-student teachers, teaching abroad, Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, and Wang (2012) support Garri’s findings by claiming “preservice teachers begin to develop the awareness, sensitivity, and skills they urgently need to bridge the gap between White teachers and their historically underprivileged student populations and to understand the rapidly diversifying classrooms in which they will teach” (p. 336). Biraimah and Jotia (2012) contend that not only do students who student teach abroad show growth in cultural understanding and awareness, but they also have a deeper understanding of important teaching skills such as professional development, teaching methodologies, and teaching content (p. 451).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

In the review of relevant literature, the authors found that while there were many positives about the impact that student teaching abroad has on university students, there were very few works that offer a

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