

Chapter 12

Enhancing Cultural and Linguistic Awareness Through an International Teaching Experience

Barbara A. Bradley
University of Kansas, USA

Andrea Miller Emerson
Western Oregon University, USA

Arsenio F. Silva
Clemson University, USA

ABSTRACT

The population of students in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse. At the same time, we live in highly interconnected global society with complex world problems. Thus, teachers need to prepare students to live and work collaboratively with people, locally and globally, from diverse background. Yet, how do in-service and preservice teachers support students if they have had limited experiences interacting with and understanding people from diverse backgrounds? This chapter describes a four-week summer study-abroad program in Italy, in which preservice teacher lived with a host family and observed and taught in an Italian school. It presents findings about what preservice teachers learned from (1) living with a host family, (2) observing in an Italian school, (3) becoming a culturally and linguistically diverse learner, and (4) teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The population of students in the United States (US) is becoming increasingly diverse (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In addition, we live in a highly interconnected global society with complex world problems. Solving these problems will mean bringing together people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and working collaboratively toward creative solutions. For students to become

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part of these solutions, we need teachers who can serve culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Howard, 2003) and who can help all students develop the ability to understand, learn from, and work collaboratively with people from cultures different from their own (Suárez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007; Wang, Lin, Spalding, Odell, & Klecka, 2011). How do teachers support CLD students if they, themselves, have had limited experiences interacting with, understanding, and collaborating with people from different backgrounds?

Teacher educators must fully commit to the important work of preparing preservice teachers to engage with students and families who are different from themselves. Teacher education programs typically include coursework related to language, culture, diversity, equity, and, as possible, they provide pre-service teachers with field experiences, internships, and/or student teaching in diverse settings. While these experiences are invaluable, intense first-hand experiences in a culture different from their own can provide pre-service teachers with additional insight into issues related to culture and language (Cushner, 2009). In fact, directly interacting with individuals in a foreign 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). Further, intense personal experiences in an international setting can create opportunities for preservice teachers to gain perspective through experiencing unexpected and uncomfortable situations. Teacher educators can guidance preservice teachers as they make strong connections to their teacher preparation coursework and teaching experiences in the US and consider how they might use their experiences abroad in their future teaching.

Overview of the Field Experience in Italy

This chapter describes a 4-week study abroad program in which preservice teachers engaged in a field experience in a town in Northern Italy. The students accepted into this study abroad experience were enrolled in a teacher education program and had previous field experience in schools. Prior to departure, they attended several meetings and completed readings and assignments. Throughout the duration of the program, preservice teachers stayed with and became a part of an Italian host family. In addition, based on their career goals, preservice teachers were placed in classrooms to work alongside Italian teachers and students from preschool to high school. To the best of their abilities considering language differences, preservice teachers observed and participated in class activities and taught English to Italian students. During the program, preservice teachers attended weekly group meetings and several whole group activities (e.g., visiting schools or museums). Finally, preservice teachers reflected on their experiences living abroad and working in schools by completing a blog or journal.

Participants

In 2017, 27 preservice teachers from five universities located in the Midwest and Southeast portions of the US participated in the four-week study abroad program. This chapter highlights the experiences of 16 of these preservice teachers who gave consent to participate in this study. These participants came from three universities located in the Midwest and all were undergraduates. One participant was majoring in early childhood special education, 13 were majoring in elementary education, and two were majoring in middle/secondary education. Fifteen participants were female and one was male. Thirteen

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