

“You Want Me to Lead?”

A Case Study of Pre-Service Teachers in an International Applied Learning Context in Belize

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the experiences of three American pre-service teachers participating in an international applied learning context in Belize. The pre-service teachers worked in San Pedro Town, Belize for a month with local teachers and children in primary grades. The applied learning context was a demonstration classroom located in the center of the city where local teachers and children would visit each day. The pre-service teachers were responsible for creating lessons and activities, then teaching the children in the demonstration classroom while the Belizean teachers observed. The pre-service teachers also provided professional development for the teachers in the teacher’s classroom. Through this international applied learning experience, the pre-service teachers strengthened their teaching and leadership skills while exploring their cultural sensitivity living in a new culture and country. The lessons through international applied learning contexts can greatly influence pre-service teachers’ teaching practices when they have their own classroom.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Sensitivity, Elementary Education, Globalization, International Applied Learning Experience, Leadership, Partnership

INTRODUCTION

Providing international applied learning experiences for pre-service teachers (PSTs) is a unique approach to broadening students’ ethnocentric views of the world while allowing them to utilize their acquired knowledge and skills in educational settings. Numerous researchers have discussed how international experiences have the potential to change PSTs’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices when working with culturally diverse children (Bennett, 2009; Stachowski, Grant, & Stuehling, 2015). These experiences often provide students with tours through schools, classroom observations, opportunities to talk to teachers and staff, and other cultural excursions. Furthermore, these typical experiences can impact PSTs pedagogical beliefs about teaching culturally diverse children during their field placements and student teaching (He, Lundgren, & Pynes, 2017). However, these experiences do not give students the opportunity to apply their knowledge of content and practices within their fields of study. Opportunities where students apply knowledge and skills gained from traditional classroom

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learning to hands-on and real-world settings are known as applied learning experiences and are valuable to enriching the training and practice of PSTs (Schmidt, 2010). However, less is known about the phenomenon of conducting applied learning experiences in international contexts, or international applied learning experiences. In this chapter we first present literature on international experiences and applied learning experiences and the benefits these opportunities have on PSTs growth as teachers. Next, we present a descriptive case study to illustrate the phenomenon of an international applied learning experience. At the time of the study, no studies were found investigating international applied learning experiences, thus a descriptive case study allowed us to explore this particular phenomenon.

At our university, the College of Education offers a variety of faculty-led study abroad programs to provide students with opportunities to work and study around the globe. One of the long-term partnerships our university has is with the Ministry of Education in Belize. For the past ten years, groups of PSTs have spent two-to-five-weeks working in schools across Belize with most of the time focused on schools in San Pedro. Throughout these experiences, PSTs have interned in classrooms, provided professional development to local teachers, and offered summer camps to children in the local community. In the summer of 2018, we led a group of undergraduate PSTs on a month-long stay in Belize. This trip included a wide variety of cultural and applied learning experiences, one of which was their participation in a demonstration classroom.

Officials within the Ministry shared that local classroom teachers needed more authentic and meaningful professional development about developmentally appropriate practices and effective teaching strategies. Although teachers receive professional development opportunities regularly, officials rarely see changes in classroom practice. As a result of the partnership with the Ministry and the need for innovative professional development, university faculty established a demonstration classroom in the community to give PSTs an international applied learning experience while Belizean teachers observed the implementation of engaging instructional practices. The Education Officer in San Pedro served as the administrative staff as she found a location within the town accessible to schools, created a schedule and decided which teachers and children would attend the demonstration classroom. Belizean teachers and children from four grade levels (Infant I-first grade, Infant II-second grade, Standard I-third grade, and Standard 4-sixth grade) were selected to attend the demonstration classroom. Classroom furniture, materials, and supplies were purchased or donated, and the PSTs set up the classroom several days before the demonstration lessons began. Furniture in the classroom was arranged to accommodate small group work led by each PST. The demonstration classroom not only provided the PSTs with an authentic environment to practice their teaching skills but also allowed Belizean teachers to see theory put into practice and to observe teaching strategies that could be applied in their classrooms.

The purpose of this case study is twofold. First, it explores the perceptions of the PSTs as they participated in an international applied learning experience. Primarily, we were interested in their perceptions on how this experience influenced their growth and development as future teachers. Undergraduate teacher education programs rarely provide PSTs' opportunities to serve as peers for practicing teachers (Sun & van Es, 2015). Their role is apprentice and there is no expectation they will demonstrate their own knowledge and practice. Furthermore, research has shown some teachers might be reluctant to turn their classroom over to a preservice teacher (Izadinia, 2016).

This study is grounded in a social constructivist framework and methodology. Vygotsky (1978) identifies social constructivism as the process of learning through interactions with others. In this study, preservice teachers interacted with university faculty, education administrators, classroom teachers, and children. As a result of these interactions, preservice teachers reflected on their actions, decisions, and the results of the experience. Following Yin's (2014) approach to case study methodology in the social constructivist paradigm it is important to note the importance of the relationship between researcher and participants while enabling participants to share their stories and experiences. This case study was guided by the following research question: how did the PSTs perceive their experiences in this international applied learning experience as a means to strengthen their growth and development

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